The
Zookeeper
Claudia de Plume

THE ZOOKEEPER

a novel

Claudia de Plume

A paradise has, by definition, walls.

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This is a work of fiction set in an invented world. It is not a map of any real country, institution, or person, and should not be read as one.

Prologue

*from **The Common Things: A Reader for the Second Year** *— in use in the schools of the federated world; this passage carried, unchanged, through eleven revisions.**

*

Once the world had many governments and no government, which are two ways of saying the same thing, and then, slowly, over about as long as it takes a child to grow into a person who can read this sentence, it came to have, in addition to all the many, one.

You will hear people say the one government rules the world. They are wrong, and it matters that you learn why they are wrong, because the why is the whole of it.

Think of a zoo.

The keeper of a zoo does not tell the lion how to be a lion. She does not teach the otter to swim, or choose the heron's breakfast, or settle which of the monkeys is in charge, which is a thing the monkeys must be allowed to settle wrongly, again and again, by themselves. The keeper does almost nothing that you would notice. She mends the fences. She keeps the water clean. She does not let the enclosures flood, or burn, or be opened in the night by something hungry from outside that would eat every animal in the place before morning and call it dinner. That is all she does. It is not

much. It is everything.

The one government is the keeper. It is not the animals.

You are the animals — you, and your family, and your town, and the words in your mouth, and the god you pray to or the one you do not, and the songs you will be taught and the better ones you will make up, and the arguments your people will have for a thousand more years about how to live, and how to cook a thing properly, and who owes whom an apology. None of that belongs to the keeper. The keeper would not know how. The keeper is forbidden it, on purpose, by everyone, including the keeper.

The keeper does five things, and only five, and the sixth thing it is not allowed to do is *anything else*.

It keeps anyone from ending the world. The few terrible machines that could end everything, all at once, for everyone — these are kept now in one place, behind a lock that takes two keys turned together, and the lock knows only one word, and the word is *no*.

It keeps the common things clean — the air we all breathe, the sea we all share, the high road of the sky where the old broken satellites used to gather until the keeper began, quietly, to sweep them down.

It chases, across every border, the people who do the things that must never be done — slowly, and without much thanks, because the things are the kind no one wants to remember happened.

It keeps the one money steady, the money under all the other monies, the one with the small dome printed on the back of the note that is already, perhaps, in your pocket. Take it out and look. That is the keeper, saying: *this will still be worth something tomorrow*.

And it watches the sicknesses — the great ones, the ones that would not stop if they ever started — and it watches for them before they come, which is the hardest of the five to see, because when it is done well nothing happens, and a thing done so well that nothing happens is a thing most people never learn was done at all.

That is the keeper. Five things. Everything else is yours.

The keeper believes — and this is the part the teacher will ask you to remember — that a person who is allowed to read everything cannot be easily lied to. So it built, first in one city and then in nearly every city that wanted one, a house with no fee, and no card, and no lock, and no one standing at the door to ask your business. Inside that house is every word that human beings have ever written down, in every tongue, the wise words and the foolish ones and the dangerous ones and the dull, and you may walk in, tomorrow or when you are grown, and take down any book at all, and sit on the floor with it, and read, and no one will ask you why.

There is nothing in that house you may not read.

Remember that, when you are older. It will matter to you, more than you can know now, that it is true.

*

On the day they teach you all this, they will give you paper and ask you to draw the keeper of the world.

Most of you will draw a person with a bucket of fish.

No one knows why the children always draw the bucket. It is in none of the lessons. But the teachers, who have seen it for thirty years, agree that it is, somehow, about right: not a throne, not a soldier, not a great hall — only someone plain, in ordinary clothes, doing an ordinary morning's

work, carrying food to the creatures that cannot feed themselves and would, without the fences, be eaten; someone with wet sleeves and a long day ahead; someone you would pass in the street and never know you were looking at the thing that keeps the world from ending.

You would pass her in the street and not know.

Begin.

Part One

The Offer

The world is good. The offer is made. She accepts.

Chapter One

The Morning the World Finished Becoming One

The fish smelled the way it always smelled.

Adaeze carried the bucket along the path that traced the inside of the sanctuary fence, her sandals slapping the concrete, and the smell of the herring — brought up in the night from the cold rooms and only half thawed — went ahead of her like an announcement. The otters could hear a bucket from a hundred metres. They knew this one the way they knew her step. By the time she reached the first enclosure three of the four were at the gate, standing up out of the water with their hands folded on their chests like deacons.

Three of the four. Professor would be last. He preferred to be petitioned for.

She set the bucket down and did the latch the way she did the latch. Thumb under the upper bolt — bronze, scored where she had caught it with a key six years ago and never filed smooth — then the lower, then two fingers laid against the gate-post, lightly, the way you touch a friend's shoulder to tell them you have come in. Chidi had asked her about it, his first week, watching her do it to a gate that was already shut. *Why do you do that,* he'd said, *it's locked,* and she had told him it kept the gate from forgetting it was a gate, and Chidi had laughed, which was fair, and then for a month she had caught him doing it too when he thought no one was

looking. The gate had not forgotten. The gate never did.

The three arranged themselves with the gravity of theatre managers. Mama Felicia at her left foot. Bem at her right. The new male hung back at the lip of the pool, half in the water, watching the herring and pretending not to.

From the rock at the far end a fourth otter regarded her with what she had decided, years ago, was an aristocratic boredom.

"Professor," she said. "Today is a special day. The radio said so."

Professor turned his head a quarter-inch toward the rock, by which she understood that the radio had not been forwarded to him for comment.

She fed Mama Felicia first, because Mama Felicia would otherwise open Bem along the shoulder and call it a misunderstanding. Bem second, because Bem fed second was a Bem you could work with. The new male took his fish cleanly, without theatre, without the showy juggling the young ones mostly did to be admired, and she noted it with a private, unprofessional warmth. She had been arguing his name for two weeks. *Yusuf*. It was not her decision. It was never the keeper's decision. But she had her opinion, and she fed him his second fish a beat early to apologise for having it.

Professor came down off the rock at last, with the gait of a man crossing a room to fetch a coat he has not yet decided he needs. He took the fish from her hand without looking up.

"You're welcome," she said.

The radio in the keeper's hut had been going when she let herself in before six. Between two songs, with no particular weight on it, the announcer had said that the final ratification had passed in the night — the last parliament,

the last yes — and somewhere behind his voice a single bell had rung, once, probably from inside the studio, the way you might tap a glass at a wedding you were not sure deserved a speech. Then the next song had started. A love song. Something with a guitar.

So that was how that had happened.

She walked the inside of the fence with the empty bucket, looking down through the wire at the lagoon. Weak-tea brown, as ever, a little colder than the air. Somewhere past the city the morning was doing something else with itself; here the sea breeze had not yet bothered to arrive and the air lay on her shoulders like a wet shawl. She would change her shirt before the visitors came. She always sweated through the first one by seven and there was no dignity in greeting a busload of nine-year-olds smelling of yourself and fish.

She tried to remember when she had voted.

A Thursday. She steadied the memory the way you steady a coin on its edge. She had cooked rice the night before with too much pepper — that part came back first, the pepper, Iyanna across the table waving a hand in front of her own face and saying *are you trying to kill me or just the flavour*. The form had come in a green envelope, modestly printed. She had filled it in at the kitchen table with the pen she used for the feed inventory, and walked it to the postbox the next morning on the way to the tram, and got the box's metal mouth wet on her knuckles because it was raining. Thirteen questions. Only one of them the question. The other twelve she had read twice each because the instructions asked her to, and she was the sort of person who, asked twice by an instruction, complies.

She remembered the pepper better than the question.

The question itself had been — she felt for it now and was mildly surprised by how little it weighed — *Shall the federation of common matters proceed?* She had ticked yes. She had ticked yes the way you accept a niece's wedding invitation when you have already bought the dress: a small administrative confirmation of a decision the body had already made weeks before. Then she had walked to the tram in the rain.

That was that. That was how she had helped make one world out of the many. With a borrowed pen, over rice gone wrong, on her way to work.

Mama Felicia had drifted up to the gate and pressed her flank to the wire. Adaeze crouched and found the place between her shoulder blades that not even the other otters knew about. The tail made one slow dignified revolution and settled.

"Yes," Adaeze said. "We noticed."

She was rinsing the bucket at the outside tap, thumb over the spout to make the water work harder, when she saw the woman at the visitor's gate.

The woman wore a grey coat to the ankle, cut straight, of a kind that did not believe in weather. A leather case in the left hand. No umbrella, though the sky had the swollen, deciding look it got before rain. Her hair had been cut recently by someone competent and unremarkable. She was not looking at the otters, or at the children coming up the road, or at anything at all. She stood the way Adaeze had learned to stand near a nervous animal: weight even, hands visible, going nowhere, in no hurry, a person who had made stillness a kind of work.

Adaeze's first feeling was not fear. It was the small flat alertness she got when a creature she didn't know had come

quietly up to the fence and was waiting to see what she'd do. You did not turn your back on that. You also did not let it see you decide not to.

The first children were arriving, handed up the road by parents on the way to their own mornings. One of them had got to the gate already — Tomi, who was six, and knew every otter's name and rank and would correct any adult who erred. He was studying the woman with the frank, total attention only the very young and the very old can spend on a stranger.

"Sir," Tomi said, with enormous courtesy, "are you here for the otters?"

The woman did not correct him.

"No," she said, in a voice the same shade as the coat. "I am here for Madam Okonkwo."

Tomi turned and pointed, dutifully, at Adaeze.

Adaeze straightened from the tap, set the bucket on its hook, and dried her hands down the front of her shirt as she came. She did not hurry. No one had given her a reason to, and she had learned long ago that hurrying toward a creature told the creature more than you meant it to.

"I'm Adaeze Okonkwo," she said, through the gate.

"Yes." The woman inclined her head a precise degree. "I am Therèse Vanderhoek. I would like to ask you, when you have finished your morning, to come with me on the tram."

The tram.

Behind Tomi two more children had arrived with their mother, who had a phone wedged to her cheek with her shoulder and one hand hooked round the smallest one's wrist; she was saying *no, the blue gate, the blue one, I'm standing at it.* A keeper Adaeze didn't recognise from the weekend rota was unlooping the chain on the education

shed. The morning was assembling its ordinary noise around them, and into it this woman had dropped one sentence, flat as a coin on a counter, and gone still again.

"Is something the matter?" Adaeze asked.

"Not in the sense you may be imagining." Therèse paused — searching the air for a word she'd have preferred and not finding it. "I am from the Custody. We would value your help with a thing today. I have given my morning to coming to ask you in person."

"The Custody," Adaeze said.

"Yes."

She had heard the word the way you've heard the word *atmosphere*. It was there; it did not require her. Part of the Council. The part that — she reached for it — watched the bad sicknesses? The part with the two keys. There had been a radio programme about it once, a calm one, men with calm voices, that she had half-heard while painting the inside of the filtration shed a colour Iyanna had mixed for her and named, on the tin, *Don't Argue Grey*.

"You came on the tram," Adaeze said, because she did not yet know what she wanted to ask, and a fact was something to hold.

"I came on the tram from the airport. Before that the train, before that another tram. I have not been in a private vehicle since Tuesday." She said it with the small exactness of a person reading out a credential she did not enjoy needing. "The Custody is not a fortress. It is a procedure. The procedure travels by tram."

"Mm," Adaeze said.

She glanced back at the enclosure. Professor had come to the wire and put his face up at her with the precise neutrality of an aristocrat at a passport desk: he saw her, he saw the

stranger, and he would require an explanation in his own time.

"I'll need to finish feeding," Adaeze said.

"Of course."

"And to ask Eze — the morning manager — to take my afternoon. There's a girl coming at three from the secondary school, doing a project on filtration. I can't leave her with nobody."

"Of course."

"And to phone my sister."

The coat did not move, but the exactness of the woman inside it gathered a fraction. "May I ask," Therèse said, "what you would tell her?"

"That I'm being asked to take a tram with a woman from the Council on a matter I don't understand. That I'll be back by supper. That she should not over-water my plants while I'm gone — the rosemary sulks."

For the first time the woman let her face do something other than wait. It did not become a smile; she had not, Adaeze guessed, let it become one in some years, the way some people stop using a word in a language they no longer go home to. But the set of her mouth eased, briefly, the way it eases on a person who has been spoken to as a person and not as a gate.

"You may tell her that," Therèse said. "I would only ask that you not use the word Custody."

"I wasn't going to," Adaeze said. "I didn't know it before this morning."

"Yes," said Therèse Vanderhoek. "That is more or less what I came to tell you. You did not need to."

Adaeze shut off the outside tap with two fingers, the same touch she gave the gate, and decided that she did not like

this woman. Then, in the next breath, that she did. The two judgements did not argue with each other. She had felt them before, in that order, about people whose company she would keep for years.

She went back up the path to finish her otters.

Professor took his second fish — he always required a second, formally, the way a country requires its anthem — with the briefest of acknowledgements. Then, while she leaned her elbows on the wire to watch him eat, he did the one private trick he did some mornings and not others, that no two visitors had ever caught on the same day: carried the fish to the edge, set it down in the shallows, and ate it under the surface with his eyes shut, with the abandon of a man in a hot bath.

Good, then, she thought, and could not have said what she meant by it.

She locked the inner gate — top, bottom, two fingers — and went to find Eze.

He was in the seal run, down on one knee on the wet boards, a torch in his teeth, tilting the old female's head to the light to look at the cataract that had been thickening over the cold months like ice on the inside of a window. He did not stop what he was doing when Adaeze told him she had to go out, unexpectedly, the rest of the day, and that yes, she'd explain when she could, and yes, she'd owe him.

Eze took the torch out of his mouth.

"You always owe me," he said. "I'm building a wing onto my house with what you owe me." He fitted the torch back between his teeth, then took it out again. "The filtration girl. Three o'clock."

"I told her."

"I'll mind her. If she touches the back-flush valve I'm telling her mother it was your idea." He went back to the seal. The seal sighed through her nose, a long put-upon sound, and let him turn her head. "Go on. Whatever it is. You've got a face on you."

"I haven't got a face on me."

"You've got the face you had the morning of the rota meeting about the sick budget." He didn't look up. "Go."

She called Iyanna from the back office, standing because the chair had a broken caster and tipped you toward the filing cabinet if you trusted it.

Iyanna picked up on the fourth ring with the receiver clearly jammed between ear and shoulder, both hands busy. There was a hardware brightness behind her, a tin being shaken, the small marbles inside a paint can rattling as the machine worked.

"It's me," Adaeze said.

"I know it's you, your name's on the — hold on." Away from the phone, warm and quick: "No, ma, that's the undercoat, you don't want the undercoat, the undercoat's for under. Yes. The one in your hand." Back. "What."

"I have to go out today. A work thing. Out of the city, maybe. I'll be back by supper."

"What work thing."

"A — Council thing. A woman came. About the sanctuary, sort of."

The paint machine stopped. In the quiet Adaeze could hear her sister choosing, out of several available replies, which one to spend.

"A woman came," Iyanna said.

"Yes."

"From the Council. To the otters. About the otters." A pause exactly the length of one customer being waved toward a different shelf. "Adaeze. The Council does five things. I can name them. Mama made us learn them in the yard, you cried because you couldn't get the order. None of the five is *otters*."

"It's not — I don't fully know what it is. That's why I'm going."

"Did she show you anything? A card, a— "

"She came on the tram, Yanna. From the airport. She hasn't been in a car since Tuesday, she made a point of telling me."

"That's not a reason to trust someone, that's a reason to wonder what they're proving." The machine started again; Iyanna had to lift her voice over it, which made the next part come out plainer than she probably wanted. "Be careful."

"It's a tram, Yanna."

"That's why," Iyanna said, and hung up, the way she hung up — no goodbye, the click of someone already three steps into the next customer — and Adaeze stood holding the dead receiver and the particular ache of being loved by someone with no patience for being thanked for it.

When she came back out to the visitor's gate, Therèse was crouched on her heels, the leather case set square on the ground beside her, listening to Tomi with the whole of her face. He had a finger hooked through the wire, aimed at the new male.

"— and that's why he has to be Yusuf," Tomi was explaining, "because he is a Yusuf. Look at his eyes. Those are Yusuf eyes."

"They are," Therèse agreed, gravely. "I would not have known the name on my own. Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome," Tomi said, and went off satisfied, the way the young go off when an adult has finally got the point.

Therèse rose, brushing at a knee that had not got dusty. Adaeze watched her do it — the reflex of a person who keeps her clothes in a state, who travels light and arrives clean, who has nowhere that is exactly home and so keeps the coat instead.

"Shall we walk to the tram?" Therèse said. "I don't know the way. Yours is the city, not mine."

"It's this way."

The latch of the staff gate, behind her — top, bottom, two fingers — was already done.

The road to the tram ran along the inside of the lagoon wall for three blocks before it turned in among the houses. The heat had not yet made up its mind. Two women in lapas were conducting a long, affectionate argument over the price of ugu at a stall, neither of them in any danger of buying or selling. A man went by on a scooter with a sleeping child folded against his back, one of the child's arms hanging down loose, asleep before the rest of him knew it. A boy was laying out a board of phone-credit cards on an upturned crate, weighting the corners against the wind with four stones he'd clearly chosen for the job and kept. The radio from his shoulder was the same station that had married the world in the night, on a different song now, and Adaeze noticed it and then, deliberately, the way you set down a fish you are not going to use, did not notice it.

Therèse walked at her left elbow at a half-pace, asking nothing, hearing everything. She did not touch the coat. She did not touch the case. She did not look back over her shoulder once, which Adaeze, who looked back at her animals a hundred times a day, found she could not quite

trust and could not quite fault. She walked the way a guest walks through a friend's house while the friend is in the kitchen: careful of the furniture, careful not to seem to be pricing it.

At the corner Adaeze stopped to let a cyclist swing past with a tower of bread on the rack, and Therèse stopped with her, and her eyes went, once, to the back of Adaeze's right hand and away again in the same motion. The scar there was old and pale and shaped like a comma — a sub-adult, six years gone, a bad morning, a lesson learned. The look had been quick. But it had been a look that knew what it was looking at, and filed it.

"I'll be asked," Adaeze said. "Won't I."

"Asked what?"

"To do a thing. A particular one." She watched the bread go away from them down the road. "I can hear it under your sentences. You came to my gate. You came on the tram from the airport. You let me say *rosemary* and you went still."

"I did not know about the rosemary."

"You knew to listen when I said it."

Therèse considered that, in the grey coat, in the deciding light. "Yes," she said.

"You can tell me on the tram."

"I would prefer to."

The stop was at the bottom of the next short slope, a painted shelter, a painted sign, two benches. One bench an old man had claimed by setting out a chessboard and beginning, against himself, a game he was visibly going to lose. From the top of the slope you could see the line run a long way between the house-fronts, all the way to where it lifted onto the bridge.

Therèse checked the posted timetable on the shelter post. Not, Adaeze saw, because she doubted her own information — a woman like this would have known the schedule before she landed — but because she had the habit of confirming what she expected against a clock the city itself kept up. It was, Adaeze would think much later, the most honest gesture she made all day: a powerful person, checking the public clock, in case the public clock knew something she did not.

"There's one in four minutes," Therèse said.

"Yes."

The old man set down his rook with great care and did not look at either of them.

Adaeze put her hands in her shirt pockets and watched the bridge. Down the long bright stripe of the rails the tram came up as a slow bead of light, grew, and resolved into the green-and-cream of the city line, sliding toward them with the plainness of a thing a city has decided to do well and then stopped congratulating itself for.

She thought of Professor — the fish set down in the shallows, the closed eyes, the privacy of it. She held the thought for two breaths and then let it go, the way you let go of an animal you have finished examining: gently, all at once, so it doesn't startle.

The tram stopped. The doors folded back. Therèse Vanderhoek, in her grey coat, stepped to the edge of the shelter to let the old man with the chessboard go first — he did not; he had a rook's whole future to consider — and then, with a tip of her head that was not, quite, a bow, put out her hand toward the open door.

Adaeze stepped onto the tram.

Chapter Two

The Tram, the Library, the Door

The tram had eleven other passengers, a folded pushchair, a man asleep under a hat, and a boy of six or seven with a kite across his lap who had reached the age at which it was permissible to sit alone at the back and not at all permissible to look at your mother in the second row. The mother had given up the pretence and was reading a paperback with a cracked spine, holding her place against the tram's sway with one thumb. Up front, the driver's window held a strip of paper, hand-lettered: *OUT OF ORDER — USE OTHER DOOR — sorry — T.* Somebody named T. was sorry. The tram took the bend at the bottom of the lagoon road with the unhurried grace of a vehicle ninety years in the habit of that exact bend, and a tinny voice from the ceiling named the stop in three languages, the last of which Adaeze did not have but recognized by its music as one of the river tongues from the east.

Therèse had taken the window seat.

She had not taken the aisle, which would have boxed Adaeze in against the glass. She had taken the window, which left Adaeze the aisle, which left Adaeze the way out. It was the same courtesy as the seat at the gate, the same courtesy as the timetable checked against the post — and it was the kind of arrangement Adaeze would come to recognize, later, as a Custody arrangement: not permission, exactly. The careful construction of one.

"You'll need," Therèse said, in a voice pitched under the tram's noise, "to come a little further than the city today."

"Yes. I'd begun to think so."

"I'm sorry not to have said earlier. You'd have packed differently."

"I wouldn't have packed at all," Adaeze said. "I'd have looked at the rosemary one more time."

Therèse considered the rosemary. She gave it the same gravity she'd given the morning's other arrangements, as though it had been entered somewhere and would have to be accounted for. "Your sister can water it. We can give you a phone."

"I have a phone."

"I know."

"And you'd rather," Adaeze said, "I used yours."

"I'd rather," Therèse said, "tell you something true now. Any call you make, from any phone, for the next three days, will leave a small honest line in a Custody log. The line says: a call was made, by you, of about this length, from about this place. Not the words. We don't keep the words. We keep the surface of the procedure, because the surface is the part we're required to be honest about." She said it to the window, in the voice she'd used for the time of the next tram. "I'd rather you knew that than not. I've no instrument that could keep it from you, and wouldn't use one if I had it."

Adaeze sat with that.

The boy at the back had got the kite a hand's-width open. Without looking up from her book the mother said his name — one word, weary, expert — and the kite folded again, and the boy bore it with the patience of someone whose adult life would, much later, be set free by the discovery of origami. The tram bent. The lagoon flared past on the right, and in it

a heron stood on one leg, perfectly still, fishing the way Adaeze fished nothing all day: by waiting.

"What do you do?" Adaeze said.

"Today I'm sitting on a tram with a woman from Lagos who's being asked to help with a procedure." A pause. "The rest of the year, I sit in small rooms with other people from the same office and we say no to things. That's the whole of it. We're a place where a particular kind of no gets said. We don't invent. We don't authorize. We don't promote. We don't patrol. You might call us a department of refusal."

"And what do you refuse?"

"The fifth thing."

"The Council has five things." Adaeze counted them off without meaning to, in Mama Nneka's order, the order she'd cried over in the yard at nine: "End of the world. The commons. The crimes that cross borders. The money. The sicknesses."

Something passed over Therèse's face — not surprise; something more like recognition, quickly put away. "The fifth," she said. "The sicknesses. The big ones, the ones that wouldn't stop if they started. There's a half of that work people talk about — the monitoring, the sequencing, the wastewater, the border stations. That's the open half." She looked at Adaeze, then back to the glass. "We're the other half."

"And the other half is."

"Information," Therèse said. "We say no to information."

The tram slid into the riverside terminus and stopped. The doors woke and opened. The boy with the kite went off ahead of his mother with the air of a man pleased to have survived being seated near her; the mother followed, shaking her head, the cracked paperback already back open;

the man under the hat woke, looked around, decided it was not his stop, and went back to sleep. Adaeze and Therèse stayed in their seats, because Therèse, plainly, was not finished.

"You'll think," Therèse said, "I'm about to tell you about a virus. A sequence someone might write down that would let ordinary clever people start something we couldn't stop. We do hold those. We say no to printing those. It's the oldest of our work, and the easiest to defend in the interview we have to give once every five years."

"This isn't the interview."

"No."

"And you're not about to tell me about a virus."

"I'm about to tell you about a different sort of sequence." And here her voice did the thing a voice does when it has been carrying a sentence a long way and finds, at the door, that the sentence will not fit through the frame. She stopped. Started again, smaller. "A recipe — that's our word for it, among ourselves. Not a weapon. A recipe by which this office, the closed half I've just described, was built, forty years ago, to be able to go on saying no for forty years without rotting, slowly, into an office that said yes. It's the recipe for our own architecture. It's the most dangerous thing we keep, because it's the one that, if it got loose, would let someone build the counter to it — and use the counter, in time, to get yeses out of us."

"And someone's reading it."

"Someone's *deriving* it. They don't have it. They're working it out, by inference, from what's public. We think they'll reach it within a season. There's something we can do, in that case. It's been waiting forty years to be done. I've come to ask you to do it."

Adaeze said nothing for a moment.

A second tram drew in alongside the first, nose to nose across the platform. Its doors opened; a crowd went onto it and a different crowd came off; and Therèse stood, and Adaeze stood, and they crossed to the other — which was not a tram in the local sense at all, but one of the long quiet inter-city trains Adaeze had ridden, in her whole life, maybe twice.

Yanna will need a second call.

Behind her, Therèse said nothing about the second call.

The journey took most of the morning. They sat across a narrow table, and Therèse, having set down the one large stone, let it lie. She did not fill the silence. That alone marked her out from everyone Adaeze had ever shared a long train with; most people, given four hours and a stranger, will tell you their whole life by the second station rather than sit in quiet. Therèse sat in the quiet the way the heron stood in the lagoon — not waiting for anything, exactly. Just declining to thrash.

So Adaeze watched her, the way she watched a new animal in its first week: not staring, which frightens them, but keeping the creature in the soft edge of her attention while seeming to look at the country. And the country was worth looking at — flooded fields with the sky lying down in them, a stretch of grey sea, a long reach of inland water she did not know the name of and did not ask. But mostly she read Therèse.

The woman did not sleep. She did not read; she had no book, and did not take out a phone — Adaeze had not once, all morning, seen her hold a phone. She did not eat the biscuits she had bought, though she put them on the table between them, turned so the open end faced Adaeze. She sat

with her hands loosely together and watched the same window Adaeze watched, and twice her eyes closed for the length of three breaths and opened again, and Adaeze understood that this was a person operating on a sleep debt she had stopped expecting to repay. You saw it in old keepers. You saw it in the women at the fruit stalls who had been up since four. It was not weakness. It was a body kept going past the point where the body votes.

A steward came with tea on a rattling trolley. Therèse paid for both with an unmarked card the steward did not look at twice.

"You should eat one of those," Adaeze said, nodding at the biscuits. "You bought them. You've put them where I can reach them and not where you can. That's a person who's decided the food is for someone else."

Therèse looked at the packet as if it had been entered into evidence without her consent. "I'm not hungry."

"I didn't ask if you were hungry. I keep animals that forget to be hungry when they're frightened or working. It's the same animal." Adaeze took a biscuit, ate half, and set the other half down on Therèse's side of the table, in the no-man's-land between them, the way she'd drop a fish a little short of a wary otter and step back. "I'm not going to watch you not eat for four hours. It'll put me off mine."

For a moment Therèse did nothing. Then she picked up the half-biscuit and ate it, with the faint embarrassment of someone caught out in a habit they had thought invisible, and said, "Thank you," in a voice that had had the procedure briefly knocked out of it; and Adaeze, who had spent her life getting frightened creatures to take food from her hand, felt the small private click of a thing going right, and looked back out at the water so as not to spoil it.

Adaeze drank her own tea slowly and watched the back of her scarred hand on the table, the comma the otter had left her, and did not call Iyanna until the train was nearly in, and then said only: *Yanna. I'm sorry. It's going to be tomorrow. The rosemary will live. Yes. I love you too.* Iyanna did not say *be careful* this time. She said *yes,* and *all right,* and *tell me when you can,* and was gone.

The city, when they reached it, was pale stone and a low river under a great deal of late-spring warmth the morning had not promised. Adaeze had no other clothes. Therèse stopped, without comment, at a shop near the station and bought her — over an objection that was procedural rather than felt — a clean shirt, a cardigan, and a packet of biscuits. The cardigan was the colour of an early-evening sky and fit her better than anything she had ever chosen for herself. She wondered how Therèse had known her size, and decided, the way you decide not to look down from a height, not to ask.

You could not, at first, see the Repository. The streets bent away from it, the way streets bend a river around a stone. Then you came round one particular corner and it was the whole of what was in front of you.

It was not tall.

That was the first surprise: it did not rise, it spread — low against the city, a dome that was hardly a dome, more a long swell of pale stone like a sleeping shoulder, the ordinary streets running up to its edge and simply stopping. No steps. No guards. Broad doors stood open at the four corners of the world, and people went in and out of them with the steady, absent traffic of a market — a woman with a string bag, a man eating something out of paper as he walked, two students with a quarrel between them they'd brought in and would carry out again unresolved.

Therèse said nothing about it. She let Adaeze look.

They went in by the south door.

Inside was the largest room Adaeze had ever stood in, and it was quiet — the second surprise — not silent, but quiet the way a ward is quiet, or a forest at dusk: a quiet packed full of small sound. The hush of pages. Somewhere, a squeaking cart wheel that wanted oil, pushed by somebody in no hurry to give it any. A child cross-legged on a cushion before a volume nearly its own size, turning each page with both hands and the whole front of its tongue between its teeth. Two old men at opposite ends of one long table, leaning toward each other across the wood like conspirators of forty years' standing. A young woman asleep in an armchair, a book open in her lap, her hand still inside it keeping the place her mind had left.

Near the door someone had set up a yellow folding sign: *FLOOR REPAIR — PLEASE MIND THE ROPE.* A short rope cordoned off three flagstones that had sunk, and a man in knee-pads knelt inside the rope working mortar into the gaps with a flat knife, unhurried, humming, restoring by hand the floor that ten thousand feet a day wore down. No one watched him. He was as ordinary as the light.

That, more than the dome, was what undid something in Adaeze's chest: not the grandeur, but the kneepads. Somebody mended this. Every day, somebody mended this, on their knees, so that the rest could walk in and read without looking down.

A scholar passed, three books in the crook of an arm and a pencil behind one ear, and nodded to Therèse without slowing, and did not look surprised to see her, or to see Adaeze with her, which Adaeze filed without yet knowing where.

"Every text in human writing," Therèse said. "Every one we've been able to find. Open shelves. Open doors. No fee, no card, no register. A child in this city is taught, the second year of school, where to come if there is something she wants to read that the school does not have. She comes here. She takes it down. She sits on a cushion. No one asks her why."

"Yes."

"This is true. All of it. There is no caveat. There is nothing in this room you cannot read." Therèse turned a few degrees and lifted one hand a little way — only a little, because the room was too large to point at — toward the long pale ceiling. "This is the dome," she said. "It's true."

She let Adaeze stand a long time.

Then: "There is, beneath us, a room that is not true in the same way."

She did not move toward it. She let Adaeze keep watching the child with the too-large book a moment more, the small tongue, the both-handed page, before she said: "I'll take you to it when you're ready."

"I'm ready," Adaeze said, after a while.

The descent was not the descent of a fortress.

There was a plain wood door behind a long run of stacks, no different from a dozen others. Therèse opened it with an ordinary key off an ordinary ring — and then had to lift the door slightly on its hinges with the heel of her hand, where it had dropped and caught on the frame, the way the side door of the mother's house caught in the wet season. She did it without remark, a person who had opened this door enough times to know its fault. *They have not even fixed the hinge,* Adaeze thought, and the thought steadied her more than anything Therèse had said all day: whatever was down here, it was kept by people who lived with a sticking door.

Behind it, a room smaller still: three chairs, a table, and on the table a single printed sheet — a procedural acknowledgment that Adaeze read with a care she had given to almost no document in her life. She signed it. Therèse signed it. The third person in the room — a tall man, sixties, who had nodded to her once and said nothing — countersigned, took the sheet, laid it in a drawer, and stood.

His name was Henri. He gave it once, *Henri,* and that was the whole of his speech in her hearing that day. He turned a key on the inside of a second door. Therèse, with a second key, turned it the rest of the way.

It was the two keys turning at once — the small mechanical agreement of them, like two latches finding home in the same breath — that brought the cold into Adaeze's hands for the first time that morning.

Two keys, she thought, before she could stop herself. *They weren't joking about the two keys.*

The second door gave onto a stair, going down in good light between walls of dressed stone. Therèse went first. Adaeze followed. Henri stayed at the top.

The stairwell walls were blank. Not whitewashed like a cellar, not bare like a basement — *finished,* on purpose, in the same warm pale stone as the dome overhead. No marks. No signs. Nothing. They had been kept blank the way a chapel is kept blank: by someone, deliberately, against the human wish to write on a wall. Adaeze did not yet know she was reading the architecture. But she was reading it.

Three flights. At the bottom, a short corridor, and at its end one door — wood, unmarked, no different from the door of a small study.

Therèse stopped there. She took a third key from somewhere about the coat and held it, not yet using it.

"I'll tell you what's in this room," she said, "before we go in. So that you can go back up the stairs if you want to."

"Yes."

"A table. Two chairs. On the table, a slim folio in plain leather. Three sections. The first is a summary, in plain words, of what the rest is. The second is the recipe I told you about on the tram — the architecture of this office; the thing that, known, would let someone build its counter. The third was written forty years ago by the people who built the second, and it's what we call the failsafe: a procedure that makes the first two useless, once and for all, against the kind of attack we now think is being assembled.

"The third can only be done," she went on, evenly, "by someone descended from one of the original architects, who walks into this room not knowing any of this is real. The architects — who were, I think, not entirely sane by the end — believed the cost of being able to use the failsafe should be losing, forever, the innocence that let you be invited to use it. They were sentimental people. They were also right.

"There is one living person who fits. It's you. Your grandmother — whose name is on the documentation, and whose name I haven't said and won't say until you ask me to — was one of the architects.

"Read the first page tonight and you'll know enough to choose. Read the second and you'll know enough that you can't go back. The folio is open at the table. The first page is for tonight. The second is for tomorrow, if you come back. If you don't come back, it's closed and put away, and I go home, and you never hear from us again.

"And if you say no, we accept the no. We go on with our work. You won't be watched. You won't be marked. That's true, for what it's worth."

She looked at Adaeze.

"Is it?" Adaeze said.

"It's rather the point of us," Therèse said.

There was a small interval in which Adaeze became aware of her own heart, very loud, and of the smell coming from under the door at the end of the corridor — faint, dry, old, paperish; the smell of the back room of the Repository made small and shut in.

"Open it," she said.

Therèse turned the third key.

She opened the door.

A table. Two chairs. A slim folio in plain leather, open, the first page face-up.

Adaeze sat down at the table.

She read the first page.

She did not yet read the second.

Chapter Three

What the Grandmother Built

The first page was a kind of letter.

It was set in a serif type Adaeze did not know, on paper of no modern weight — heavier than office paper, faintly cottony, the ivory of an old tooth. Generous margins. A single Roman *i* at the foot. And at the top a mark she did not recognize: a circle with a line drawn through it, small and deliberate, the kind of mark that meant nothing to her now and would, she felt without knowing why, mean something to her later.

It began without addressing her, which she liked.

This document has been prepared for someone we will not meet. We expect that by the time you sit at this table the work we are doing now will have outlasted three of us at least, and perhaps all of us, and that you will have come to it through a procedure we have not yet finished writing. We are sorry for the indirection. We are sorrier that the page is needed at all.

The voice was even, patient, institutional — a voice explaining a complicated house to the relative who has come to take it over. It did not sound like a person. That was what she noticed first, and she had nothing yet to set against it.

The Custody exists because the fifth of the Council's five matters — sicknesses — has a closed half that the open half cannot do. The closed half refuses information: in particular, the information that, widely shared, would let a

small clever group build, in a back room, the kind of weapon that does not stop. You may not have known this until very recently. We are aware that this knowledge is itself, in a lesser degree, the kind of information we refuse. We anticipated the irony. We have asked that whoever reads this page be given every chance to climb back up the stairs and forget it. The architecture is built so that they may.

She read that paragraph twice — not stopping and starting again so much as letting her eye go back over it, the way the tongue goes back over a tooth that is, on inspection, not loose.

This office has held its character across forty years through a particular architecture, of which we will say nothing here and a great deal overleaf. This first page exists only to let you decide whether to turn it. The second is what we mean by knowing. Once you have read it you will not climb the stairs in the condition you came down in. We have looked for ways to soften this. We have not found any.

A space on the page. Then:

The work going on outside this office — the work the officer who brought you here will have described — is the slow reconstruction, by inference, of that architecture. We anticipated it. At the time of building, we made a failsafe.

The failsafe rewrites the architecture, once and finally, into a form the reconstruction now under way will be useless against. There is only one. The architecture has been written so that only one can ever exist — on the principle that a body which can be reset twice will, in the end, be reset wrongly. This is the only deployment that will ever be.

It can be performed only by a particular person: a descendant of one of the architects who consented to be, in this sense, a parent of the failsafe; and one who walks into this room not knowing the room, the document, or the architecture exists. The first is a matter of record. The second is a matter of trust. We have trusted the officer who brought you here to honour it.

The architect whose line keys the failsafe is named in the paragraph below. We have kept her name out of the body of this page so that you may, if you wish, close the folio now and never learn it. We do not know who she will have become by the time you read this. We knew only that whoever she became, she would have lived long enough to leave descendants we would never meet. We are grateful to her for agreeing to be the kind of architect she had to be for this to work.

A space again.

Adaeze laid both hands flat on the table. She did not look down. She looked at the wall opposite — the same warm pale stone as the rest of the building — and behind her shoulder she could feel the quiet shape of Therèse Vanderhoek standing where she'd stood since opening the door: not closer, not further, not breathing in any way Adaeze could hear.

She already knew the name.

She had known since the corridor. She had known for certain when Therèse said *one of the architects* on the train. And she had known, in some smaller back part of herself, since the morning years ago when she'd reached for that thirteenth question on the green form and found it faintly familiar in a way she had not bothered to chase — because some part of her had heard the family say *the work,* and had

decided, in the careful way of people who decide not to look at a thing, not to look at it.

She looked down.

The name was set in the same serif as everything else. It needed no other weight.

Mama Nneka Okonkwo.

Nothing followed it. The little Roman *i* sat at the foot of the page, apologizing, it seemed, for having been numbered at all.

Adaeze said the name aloud.

"Mama Nneka."

It was not a question. It was a word she had said since she was four, when Mama Nneka was alive to answer it — said at the foot of beds, at the heads of staircases, once, very young, straight into the grille of a radio because she had been certain the radio was listening. She had said it at the funeral, twelve years ago, the once, and then stopped saying it for a long time. The shape of the two words in her mouth was older than most of her teeth.

"Yes," Therèse said, behind her.

"Yes."

She closed the folio.

Not a melodrama, the closing. The way you close any book you have not finished — finger laid in, cover folded over, finger drawn out. The folio settled without a sound. The leather was warm where her hand had been.

She did not stand.

After a while, without moving, Therèse said: "There's a room upstairs we keep for this. A bed, a window, a desk. Henri's gone to bring you something hot. I'm not asking, now, whether you'll read the second page. I'm asking whether you'll come up and have something hot."

"Yes," Adaeze said.

She stood. She did not look back at the folio. Therèse, who had foreseen even that, was already at the door, holding it without seeming to hold it, and Adaeze went through, and the corridor was as short as before, and the three flights were as quietly made.

Henri was at the top. Not waiting in any visible way — simply standing where he'd stood, holding a tray. On it: an enamelled pot, one cup, a dish of biscuits, and a square of paper folded once. He had carried it up without spilling a drop, an old man's steadiness, the cup not even turned in its saucer.

"Madam Okonkwo," he said — which she registered, in the moment, as the second sentence she had heard him speak all day.

"Thank you, Henri."

A quarter-inch of a bow. He went ahead of them down the corridor and up a half-flight Adaeze had not noticed coming in, set the tray on the desk, bowed again — the same exact small amount, as if it were a fixed cost he paid — and left. Therèse said nothing at all.

The room had one window, onto a courtyard with a fig tree and three pigeons along the rim of a fountain that no longer ran. A bed, made. A desk with a lamp and nothing else. A chair beside it — the chair of a relative's spare room, not an institution: its cushion worn into a depression by everyone who had sat there before her, a depression deep enough that they must have sat a long time, and no one had thought, or had the heart, to replace it.

Therèse stayed in the doorway.

"There's a bell on the wall. Ring it and I'll come. If you don't, I'll come at eight. I'd rather not come before, unless

you'd rather — because I think there's something you'll do in this room tonight that is yours, and I wouldn't improve it by being in it."

"All right."

"One more thing. The paper on the tray is from your grandmother. She left it for whichever of her descendants found themselves in this room. It isn't the failsafe. It's a private note. Read it tonight, read it tomorrow, don't read it — nothing hangs on it. It's hers."

Adaeze looked at the folded square on the tray.

"All right," she said again.

"Good night, then."

"Good night, Therèse."

The door closed. She heard Therèse go down.

For a while she did nothing.

She sat on the edge of the made bed and watched the window. The fig tree laid its evening shadow up the courtyard wall. The pigeons did nothing in particular — the kind of pigeons that have spent enough years in one courtyard to consider themselves part of the masonry. Far off in the building a kettle made the sound a kettle makes at the end of being used. A door shut. Another door shut, further away.

She thought of Iyanna.

Iyanna at the paint counter, telling a stranger in passing that the green they wanted came in three shades and the middle was the one they meant. Iyanna at the kitchen table three Sundays running, telling her the roof on the lagoon side had begun to go, in the patient flattened voice she'd built for telling Adaeze things Adaeze had said she had no time to think about. Iyanna this morning: *be careful. That's why*. And Iyanna twelve years ago, on the verandah the

night Mama Nneka died, eighteen years old, her face in her hands and her shoulders set against being held and against not being held in the same instant — the better of the two of them at being a granddaughter, and the one nobody had thought to comfort, because she had not made a sound.

She thought of Professor.

She thought, for a long time, of the cardigan she still had on. The colour of an early-evening sky. It fit her better than anything she had ever bought herself, which was its own small accusation.

She thought of her grandmother.

What she had of Mama Nneka, when she let herself have it, was a woman who built three things a day. A fire in the courtyard stove, every morning, crouched over it with the patience of someone laying track. A newspaper platform for whichever cat had most recently decided to live on the wall. And, in talk, the same long unhurried argument, made and remade — *not a place to be improved, child, a place to be kept.*

Adaeze had a clear memory of the fire, clearer than most. She must have been seven. She had wanted, badly, to be the one to light it, and Mama Nneka had let her, and she had heaped the kindling into a proud tall pyramid and set the match to it and watched it blaze up gorgeous and instant and gone, a fistful of flame and then grey, and she had cried. Mama Nneka had not consoled her. She had crouched down — knees cracking, a sound Adaeze could still produce in her own head — and rebuilt it the slow way, splinter under splinter, leaving room for the air, talking the whole time, not to comfort, just to narrate: *you don't build it to burn, you build it to keep. A fire you can light in one second you can lose in one second. You want a fire you have to tend,*

because the tending is the fire. It had taken her four matches and a great deal of breath and it had burned all morning. Adaeze had not understood it as anything but a lesson about fires. She understood it now, in a stone room three flights under a library, as the only thing her grandmother had ever directly told her about her life's work, said over a courtyard stove to a child too young to keep it.

That argument she had produced for every complaint Adaeze ever brought her: the broken ankle at eleven; some playground injustice; and, Adaeze knew now, the afternoon Mama Nneka came home from the hospital with the news that would, eight months on, prove correct. She built her sentences slowly, the way she built the fire. She walked everywhere, right up to the last six weeks, when walking became the one thing she could no longer build.

Adaeze had never once asked her what she had done before she stopped doing it. The family said she had *worked for the Council,* the way a family says someone worked for the railway — with the vague pride of people who do not, in the end, know. Mama Nneka had never corrected them. Adaeze had let it lie, the way you let a quiet animal lie. Now the not-asking sat in her like a swallowed stone.

She went to the desk and poured the tea — a homely cup, the size you'd use at your own table, not the thin official cup she'd half expected — and watched it steam and did not, at first, drink it.

She unfolded the paper.

One page, in her grandmother's hand. She had not seen that hand in twelve years and knew it instantly, the way you know a footstep on a stair: the slight rightward lean, the rapid set of someone who had taught herself to write at a desk that rocked. Something went through her at the sight of

it that the whole grey day had not managed — not the institution's voice, careful and bodiless, but a hand, a wrist, a particular person who had pressed too hard on the downstrokes because she always had.

The note did not sound like the folio. That was what she understood, reading it, and could not have understood without the folio first: the folio was a voice with the person scrubbed out of it. This was the person.

Whoever you turn out to be, child, I am sorry.

I have left other pages with these people, marked for when they will matter. You will not get all of me at once. I never had all of me at once either, so we are even.

The page they have shown you — the one with my name on it — is not the page I would have picked to be named on. I'd have taken a smaller one. The page where I was forty-six and had made far too much bread and your mother and her cousins ate it standing up in the yard like goats. The page where I taught your mother to drive on the bad road outside Onitsha and she put us both in the gutter and laughed so hard she couldn't work the brake. Best of all, the page from before I had learned to be the sort of woman who would help build a thing like this — but you don't get to choose your page, none of us do, you'll learn that here if you learn nothing else.

The men I built it with were certain too often and wrong about smaller things than they thought. Felicity could not boil water but believed she could read anyone in a room. Hippolytus was so sure of himself it was a kind of deafness; I loved him and I wanted to hit him with a chair for forty years. We were not wise. People will tell you we were wise. We were frightened and stubborn and we did the thing we could see, and we were never sure, on any given afternoon,

that the thing we could see was the right thing. Do not let them make me into an oracle. I burned the rice as often as you do. I once did not speak to my own sister for a year over a chair.

I will tell you the one true thing I am allowed to tell you in this room, by myself, with no procedure hanging on it: we took no pleasure in any of it. Not once. If anyone ever tells you we did, they did not know us, and you may say I said so.

*One more, and then I'll go — I can hear myself going on, which means it's time, your mother used to put a hand on my arm at exactly this point and I never thanked her for it. There will be a temptation to read the second page as a kind of finishing. To take the discomfort of this page and resolve it, by reading further, into something you can act on. Do not read it for that reason. Read it only if, when you wake, the not-reading of it is the thing you cannot live with. Read it only if your hand going toward the folio is the hand of a woman who has already, in her sleep, agreed.

Mine was. God forgive me, mine was.

— Nneka. Your grandmother. Who burned the rice.

There was no postscript. The last third of the page was bare.

Adaeze sat down on the chair with the deep cushion. She set the page flat on the desk and laid her hand over it, and the paper warmed under her palm at the rate of paper that has waited a long time at room temperature to be touched. *Who burned the rice.* She had signed it the way she signed nothing — not as an architect, not even as Nneka Okonkwo, but as the woman across the table waving a hand in front of her own face at the pepper. Two women, twelve years and a continent apart, undone by the same dish.

She did not weep. It was not the night for it.

She drank the tea, slow, in the homely cup, and watched the fig tree make its evening, and at some point the pigeons rearranged themselves along the fountain rim for no reason and to no effect, and the courtyard light went over into dusk.

She did not, for a long time, go to bed.

She did, in the end, lie down on the made bed with the cardigan still on, and she did, in the end, sleep. And in the morning, waking at six with the courtyard already grey-gold at the window, she did not, in any clear moment, decide. She only found that her hand was already moving to the desk, and the desk was already a step toward the door, and the door was already a step toward the stairs — and by the time she reached the bottom of the half-flight she understood that the decision had been made somewhere she did not have access to, in her sleep, the way Mama Nneka had said it would.

When Therèse came at eight she found Adaeze already at the door, hands in the pockets of the borrowed shirt, the cardigan done up at the throat.

"Good morning," Therèse said.

"Good morning."

"You slept."

"Some."

"You ate."

"Not really."

"You will, on the way back."

"Yes."

They did not speak — down the half-flight, along the short corridor, down the three flights of dressed stone. Henri was at the bottom this time, not the top, the acknowledgment already laid out with an ink pot and three

pens. Adaeze signed. Therèse signed. Henri countersigned in a hand so small and level it looked typed.

When the two keys were ready in their two locks he paused, his hand on his, and looked at Adaeze — the first time he had looked at her directly, she realized, in two days of being in rooms with him. His eyes were very pale and very tired and entirely without judgement.

"You ate nothing," he said. Not a question. He had collected the breakfast tray, then; he knew. "There is a — when you come up. There is a boiled egg, and bread, and salt. I have put salt out separately because people forget they want it until they see it." He turned his key. "Few come back up this stair able to taste anything. You will want the salt. That is all I have to tell you, and it is the truest thing anyone has said to you in this building, and I am sorry it is about an egg."

The two keys turned together, the same mechanical agreement as yesterday, and the corridor door opened.

Adaeze walked down the corridor.

She did not hesitate at the door this time. She opened it herself.

The folio was where she'd left it. The cover was still warm from yesterday, she imagined, though it could not have been.

She sat down. She set her hand flat on the cover and held it there. The latch-ritual came into her hand on its own — top, bottom, two fingers — the way the body keeps a counted stair you have climbed every day for years. She did not do it to the folio. She only let her hand rest, and let the wanting-to settle.

She thought, briefly, of Professor's shut eyes under the water.

She thought of her grandmother's note, folded now in the inside pocket of the cardigan, against the place where her heart was. *Who burned the rice.*

Then she opened the folio to the second page.

The page held something she would never, afterward, be able to describe to anyone who had not also read it.

She could not describe it because what was on the page was the *shape* of a way of building a body that would refuse — that would go on refusing, year after year, generation after generation, translation after translation, until refusing was the only motion it had left — and the shape was the kind that, once seen, arranges everything else in the mind around it the way a magnet arranges filings; and for the rest of her life she would find she no longer had the words for it that she'd had before.

She read it not fast and not slow. She read it with the close attention she'd given, as a child, to the way Mama Nneka laid a fire: every line, nothing skipped.

When she finished she sat a while without moving. The room went on being the plain room it had been on both sides of her reading. The same table. The same folio. The same deep-cushioned chair.

She had not — she registered it with an almost clinical surprise — changed in any way she could have predicted. Not braver. Not more afraid. Not wiser. She had become, in a smaller and more exact sense, *furnished.* She was now a room with one piece of furniture in it that could not be carried out again; the room had been this shape before the furniture came, and was, very plainly, a different room for having it.

She closed the folio.

She stood.

"All right," she said, to no one.

Therèse, in the doorway, did not say *yes,* and did not say *good,* and did not say anything at all. She stepped aside to let Adaeze pass.

The folio stayed open on the table behind her, at the page she had risen from, and the plain wood door at the end of the corridor closed very quietly behind them as they started back up.

Chapter Four

Iyanna

The journey home was the journey out, in reverse, and was not.

It was the same train — the same long quiet inter-city, the same small table at which she had sat with Therèse the day before — only this time the seat across from her was empty. Therèse had said goodbye at the platform with the particular formality of a person who had not yet decided whether to be a friend, and had given Adaeze a small card with two numbers written on it and one address, and had said: *we will meet again in three days. Use the address only if you cannot reach the numbers. Use the numbers as you would use the numbers of a doctor.*

"All right," Adaeze had said.

"Adaeze."

"Yes."

"On your way home, do nothing. Sleep if you can. Eat if you can. We will not, for the next three days, ask anything of you."

"All right."

Therèse had looked at her, then, in the way she had looked at her at the visitor's gate the morning before — patient, considering, not pretending that she was offering anything she was not.

"I will miss you," Therèse had said, which had not been what either of them had expected her to say, and which

Therèse herself had received with the small precision of a person watching a coin she had not meant to drop hit a floor.

"Three days, then," Adaeze had said.

"Three days."

The train left.

Adaeze sat at the table by the window for the first hour, watching the country go by in the wrong direction. The cardigan was buttoned at the throat. The paper from her grandmother was folded in the inside pocket against the place where her heart was; she could feel its corner, a small folded shape that did not move when she breathed.

The second hour she did not watch the country.

The third hour she slept, with her head against the window and her hands folded together on the table in front of her, and when she woke the steward was clearing a cup she had not realized she had drunk. There was a biscuit on the saucer. She ate it. The steward inclined his head and went on.

She thought, then, of what had been on the second page; or rather she reached for it and found it would not be thought about, not the way other things were. It did not present itself for inspection. It had gone down into a deeper register — to the place where she knew, without deciding to, how to set down her own hand, how to fold a piece of paper. It was simply in her now. She did not think of it. She was, now, the kind of person who had it.

This had not, as her grandmother's letter had warned, resolved anything.

The train arrived in Lagos at half past six in the evening, in the way trains arrive in Lagos — with no particular ceremony, into a station that was full of children selling water and women on phones and an old man with two

chickens in a covered basket who was, from his expression, going to lose at least one of them on the next bend. The light was the warm undecided light of a Lagos sundown. The sea breeze had arrived. Adaeze stood for a moment on the platform with her hand on the inside pocket of the cardigan, and then she found a tram, and then she went home.

Home was the mother's house.

It had not, for some years, been Adaeze's house. Adaeze had a flat of her own on the other side of the city, with the rosemary and three other plants and a cat that had not, lately, been her cat in any committed sense, and a sofa whose cushions she had not chosen, and a kitchen she used twice a week. She lived in it the way a person lives in a flat that they intend, one day, to move out of. The mother's house was the one she came home to when she came home.

Iyanna was on the verandah when Adaeze came up the path.

She had a glass of something in one hand and a book in her lap, which she had not been reading; she had been watching the line of palms that ran along the lagoon side of the wall. When Adaeze came through the gate she did not stand. She did not move her face. She looked, only, with the particular attention of a sister.

"You said tomorrow," Iyanna said.

"I said I would be back tomorrow. I am back tomorrow. It is now tomorrow's evening."

"That is not — Adaeze. Sit down. There is something I want to ask you."

"Hello, Yanna."

"Hello, Adaeze. Sit down."

Adaeze sat. The verandah was warm from the day. The chair she sat in was the one she always sat in. There was a

glass on the table that had been poured before she came up the path, which she did not, at first, recognize the choreography of, and then did. Iyanna had been waiting.

"The roof," Iyanna said.

"Yanna."

"The roof on the lagoon side has done it. Not the leak from three years ago. A different leak. I have had two people up there in the last month and they have given me the same number. It is too large for me to carry alone. It is small enough that the two of us can carry it, if we begin within three weeks. After three weeks the rains will have done the next thing, and it will be a different number, and not one either of us can carry."

"Three weeks."

"Three weeks."

Adaeze set her hand on the glass on the table. It was cool. She picked it up. She did not drink from it.

"I am going to be," she said, "away."

She heard herself say it. It came out, in her own ears, with the particular flatness of a sentence that has been rehearsed on a train and is now being deployed in a place the rehearsal had not anticipated. The verandah heard the flatness. Iyanna heard it.

"Away."

"Yes."

"Away where, Adaeze. What does *away* mean."

"There is a — there is a training. It is. The kind of training the sanctuary does sometimes. It is at the — at a — northern facility. I will not have my phone in the normal way. They are not — they do not want us to. It is a few weeks. I do not know exactly how many weeks."

The lie sat between them on the verandah, in the warm light, in the smell of the sea breeze and of someone's cooking two houses down. In a more practised mouth it might have done some of its work; in Adaeze's, which had never had the trick of it, it did almost none. Iyanna heard every grammar of it.

She did not call Adaeze on it.

This was — Adaeze understood, sitting on the verandah with the glass not yet drunk in her hand — Iyanna's first decision of the conversation, and the decision was not in Adaeze's favor. Iyanna was the older sister at the foot of the bed when a child has clearly broken a small thing and is offering an account of the breakage; the older sister had decided, on this occasion, to let the account run; and the running of the account was not what the child wanted. The child wanted to be caught.

"Adaeze," Iyanna said.

"Yes."

"The roof. The number. The three weeks."

"I — Yanna. I will sign whatever you need to sign before I go. I will pay my half of it. I have it, I have it set aside, I have been saving, I —"

"Adaeze."

"Yes."

"You have not been *saving*. You have, in your own way which I love you for, been *avoiding*. You have a flat with a cat that is barely your cat and you have for nine years been not coming home to this house except on the four days a year I make it impossible not to come home, and the reason you have been not coming home is not — Adaeze, this is not — it is not the house, it is not me, it is. It is her. You have not, since she died, come into the kitchen where the chair she sat

in is, and sat in any of the other chairs in that kitchen with me, for longer than ten minutes. You have been a granddaughter to her, in this house, for ten minutes a year. I do not blame you for the ten minutes. I blame you for the not-asking. I blame you for letting the ten minutes be all of it."

"Yanna."

"I am not asking you to grieve. You will grieve when you grieve. I am asking you about a roof."

"I know."

"I think you don't know."

"I do."

"You know what I think?" Iyanna had set her glass down and now she turned it a quarter-turn on the table, and another, the way she did when something was coming up out of her that she had not given permission to. "I think they always knew which of us to come for. Whoever *they* are. The northern facility." She said *northern facility* the way you'd hold a stranger's wet umbrella. "It was never going to be me at a gate. Some woman in a coat doesn't come up the path for the one who sells paint and minds the roof. She comes for the one Mama took on the long walks. The one Mama talked to."

"That's not — Yanna, that's not what this is."

"I'm not finished. You don't get to say *that's not what this is* about a thing you won't name." A breath. "She walked you to the lagoon and back every evening for what, six years? Seven? And she took me to the market. That was my walk. The market. I learned to tell a good tomato from a sprayed one and you learned — whatever you learned, walking, that put that face on you that I'm looking at right now. And I told myself for thirty years it was the same thing. A grandmother

and her two girls. It was not the same thing. She was *choosing,* and she chose you for the long road and me for the tomatoes, and the difference is sitting on my verandah lying to me about a training."

It was unfair. Adaeze knew it was unfair the way you know a wave is going to be cold — early, with the whole body, no use to you. Mama Nneka had not chosen. Mama Nneka had taken whichever child wanted to come, and Iyanna at nine had wanted the market, the money, the authority of being trusted with a basket; it was Iyanna who had peeled off toward the stalls, every time, calling back that she'd find them at the corner. Adaeze had been there. She remembered it. She could have said it.

She did not say it. Because under the unfairness was a true thing, and the true thing was that Mama Nneka *had* talked to her, on those walks, in the slow building way, and had never once talked to Iyanna like that, and Iyanna had spent thirty years not knowing it was because Mama Nneka had been deciding, even then, which granddaughter to leave a locked door to. The unfair version and the true version were the same size. You could not pull them apart. Adaeze was beginning to learn that this was the shape of every real thing that would ever be said to her again.

So she took the unfairness, and let it stand, and gave Iyanna the only true thing she could afford. "She should have walked you to the lagoon too," Adaeze said. "You'd have been better at it than me. You'd have asked her the questions I was too — I never asked her anything. I just listened. You'd have asked."

Iyanna's face did the unkind thing it did when she was trying not to do the unkind thing, and then did not do it, which was worse. A heron flew somewhere out beyond the

wall, two long slow wingbeats they could not see, only hear, a soft double haul of air.

"Don't," Iyanna said, "be nice to me right now. I can't fight you and be loved by you in the same five minutes. Pick one." She picked the glass back up. "You've been the recipient of this face eight hundred times. I counted once. You never flinch. It's infuriating. It's the only argument you win, the not-flinching." And Adaeze, who had indeed been the recipient of this face on perhaps eight hundred occasions over the course of their lives, did not flinch.

"You will go away," Iyanna said.

"Yes."

"You will not tell me where."

"I cannot, no."

"You will not tell me when you are back."

"I — yes. I will, when I am back. I will. Yanna, I will."

"You will not pick up the phone."

"I — they say —"

"They."

"Yes."

There was a long moment.

"All right," Iyanna said.

"Yanna —"

"All right." She was not looking at Adaeze. She was looking at the wall along the lagoon. "I will do the roof. I will keep the receipts. When you are back you will sit at the table with me in the kitchen where the chair she sat in is, and you will look at the receipts, and you will sit there for longer than ten minutes. That is the price."

"Yes."

"That is the price, Adaeze. That is what I am charging."

"Yes."

"Good."

She drank, then, from her own glass. Adaeze, who was still holding hers, drank from it too. It was, in the glass, water with a slice of lime in it. It tasted of the day.

They sat on the verandah for some time without speaking. The light over the lagoon went the way the light went. The sound of plantain in palm oil from two houses down stopped being the sound of plantain in palm oil and became the sound of someone scraping the bottom of a pan. A child somewhere was being called in for supper, and then was being called in again, and then was being called in by a parent who had moved to the doorway in order to be heard, and then was, finally, going in. The verandah cooled by an amount too slight to measure.

"Did you eat?" Iyanna said.

"On the train."

"Eat again."

"All right."

They went in together.

The kitchen was the kitchen. The chair their mother had sat in was the chair their mother had sat in. Adaeze sat in one of the other chairs and Iyanna sat in another and Iyanna heated, on the stove, a piece of fish and a little rice that had been there since lunch, and put it on a plate, and pushed the plate across the table to Adaeze, and Adaeze ate it, and Iyanna watched her eat it, and the chair their mother had sat in sat where it sat, and Iyanna did not speak, and Adaeze did not speak, and when the food was finished Adaeze took her own plate to the sink and washed it. Then she washed Iyanna's glass, which Iyanna had left on the verandah. Then she washed the pan the fish had been heated in.

"Stay tonight," Iyanna said.

"Yes."

"In the small room."

"Yes."

"The bed is made."

"All right."

She went up the back stair to the room that had, when they were children, been hers; that had, when their mother had been ill, become a different room; that was, now, a room in which a bed was kept made. The room was warm, and smelled, faintly, of the books that had been left in it for many years. She set the cardigan on the back of a chair. She took out, from the inside pocket of the cardigan, the folded paper from her grandmother, and she set it on the table beside the bed.

She did not, that night, sleep well.

Some time before dawn she got up and went down the back stair without putting on her sandals, and out the side door, and along the wall to the gate, and let herself through it without making any sound. She walked the four blocks to the lagoon road and the three blocks along it.

The sanctuary at dawn was almost the colour of the lagoon. The path was wet from the night. The keeper's hut was dark. She did not, of course, go in. She stood at the visitor's gate, on the outside, and she looked through.

Professor was at the wire.

He had — she did not, in this moment, find this a coincidence — been at the wire all night, perhaps. He was awake, in any case. His eyes were on her. He did not make any of the small sounds otters made.

"I know," she said, through the wire, very quietly.

He kept his eyes on her.

"I have to go for a while. Don't be — you know. Be the Professor that you are."

He blinked, slowly, once.

She set her two fingers very lightly against the outside of the gate-post. From this side it was the wrong post, the wrong direction; it was not the latching ritual; it was a thing that bore the same shape, performed in the wrong place, in the way a person performs the gesture of a half-remembered prayer in a building they have not been in for a long time. The post was cool against her fingers. She held it there for the length of three slow breaths.

"All right," she said.

She walked back to the mother's house. She did not, on the way, look at the lagoon. She did not, when she came in by the side door, wake Iyanna.

She was at the tram stop with her one small bag at seven. She had washed her face. She had finished a cup of coffee Iyanna had set on the table without comment before she had left.

Therèse was not at the tram stop.

A car was — small, ordinary, the kind of car a doctor might drive. The driver was a Custody officer Adaeze had not seen before, a woman of perhaps forty in plain clothes who did not give her name and did not need to. The woman got out, opened the back door of the car, and waited.

"I thought," Adaeze said, "we did not use cars."

"For the next leg," the woman said, "we do. I am sorry. There is no tram from here to where we are going, and we are running, today, a little ahead of yesterday's pace."

"Mm."

She got in.

The car pulled away from the kerb, past the wall of the mother's house, where Iyanna was standing in the doorway. Iyanna did not wave. Iyanna only watched.

The car turned the corner.

The mother's house went out of sight.

Chapter Five

The Brussels Spoke

The car took her, in the end, to an airport, and a flight, and another airport, and a train, and another tram. She did not, at any point along the way, ask where she was. She had decided she did not, today, have the resources to receive the answer. The unnamed officer with the calm hands handed her over at the platform of the second tram to a man Adaeze did not know, who said, *Madam Okonkwo,* and waited with her at the platform's far end without saying anything else until the next tram came.

Brussels was the colour of an old photograph.

It was raining the thoughtful rain of a Brussels late spring, the kind that has decided to be a presence rather than a problem. The tram took them along streets Adaeze had no purchase on — grey houses, a grey canal, a grey church into whose front a workman was, with great competence and no hurry at all, fitting a new pane of glass while the rain fell on his back. It was a different grey from the Repository city's pale stone, which had felt washed, ceremonial, conscious of itself. This grey was working grey. The houses stood shoulder to shoulder with the mild stubbornness of buildings that had been expensive once, in some century, and were now merely permanent; brass nameplates by the doors, most of them for firms — a notary, a society for something, an importer of something else — the discreet commerce of a city that had spent a long time being

where other people came to decide things, and had developed, like a port, a quiet competence at lodging strangers and asking them nothing.

Nobody looked at the tram. Nobody looked at Adaeze, which after Lagos was its own kind of information: a city where a woman from far away, travelling with a silent man, was simply weather. At the second-to-last stop the man she had not been introduced to stood, and held the rail for her without quite touching her arm, and they stepped down together onto a pavement she had never trod, slick and dark and laid in a herringbone someone had set, brick by brick, a hundred years before either of them, so that the rain would run off it and not pool.

He led her — at the pace at which he himself walked, which was a Custody pace — along the pavement for the length of two short blocks, and then turned in through a door of a row of doors and shut it behind them.

It was not, the place behind the door, anything in particular.

It was a narrow hallway with a stair at the end of it; a board of pegs for coats, two of them in use; and, halfway up the wall, a thermostat that someone had covered with a strip of tape and written on, in a Belgian hand, *please ask Lukasz before adjusting*. The door of the room to the left stood open on three desks and a window onto the street.

"This is the spoke," the man said.

"Yes," said Adaeze.

"My name is André."

"Yes."

"You will know everyone here by lunchtime. There are four of us today. Therèse will join in the afternoon. Would you like tea."

"Yes, please."

He took her into the room with the three desks and the window. At one of the desks a woman of perhaps thirty-five was reading something on a laptop, with a paper printed beside the laptop and a pen in her hand that she was, with some care, tapping against the corner of her mouth. She looked up when they came in. She had a long quiet face and short hair and a kind of attention Adaeze recognized immediately as Therèse's kind of attention.

"Eva," André said. "Adaeze Okonkwo."

"Hello," Eva said. She did not stand.

"Hello."

"I am sorry to meet you in this week, of all weeks."

"Yes."

"There is tea in a moment. Sit, if you like. The chair by the window is the chair that does not, when you sit in it, complain about being sat in. The other two chairs complain. It is a long-standing situation we have not resolved."

Adaeze sat in the chair by the window.

The chair did not complain.

There were, on a low shelf along the inside wall, three books and a kettle and a tin of biscuits and a ceramic pot with a single pencil in it. The kettle was an old electric one of the British kind, white plastic gone yellow at the seams, the handle scored where a thumb had rested on it for years. André pressed its switch. The kettle began the upward whine of a thing recommencing its work after a short rest.

Across the room, on the third desk, there was a tray of post that had not yet been opened.

There was nothing else in the room.

"This is what we look like," Eva said, mildly, watching her look. "I am sorry. I think people imagine — I think we partly

want people to imagine — a different sort of room. We have not, I think, in eleven years, redecorated. The kettle is fourteen years old. Lukasz, who you will meet, will not allow it to be retired. I am told the kettle has rights."

"It is a good kettle," André said, from the shelf.

"It is the only kettle that the kettle himself approves of," Eva said.

A man came in from the back with a clipboard and a screwdriver in the same hand and a look of someone interrupted mid-grievance. He was heavy, fiftyish, in a cardigan that had been darned at one elbow by a person who knew how, and he stopped when he saw Adaeze and recalibrated his face from *complaint* to *guest* with the visible effort of a man who keeps those two settings far apart.

"You touched the thermostat," he said to André.

"I did not touch the thermostat."

"Someone touched the thermostat. It is at twenty-one. I do not set it at twenty-one. Twenty-one is how the radiator on the landing develops opinions." He noticed, belatedly, that this was not the conversation to be having in front of a stranger, and turned to Adaeze with a small formal nod that did not quite forgive her for witnessing it. "Lukasz," he said. "I keep the building. You are the — yes." He did not finish. He looked, instead, at the kettle, the way a man looks at a dog he is fond of and has been defending in committee. "They have told you the kettle is fourteen. They say it as though it is a fault. It has been descaled four times by me personally and it will outlast the laptop, the lease, and possibly the Council. Do not let them retire it while I am at lunch." And he went back out, and a moment later there was the sound of him doing something firm to a pipe.

"Lukasz minds the things that can be mended," Eva said, into the small silence, not unkindly. "It is restful for him. Most of what comes through this office cannot be."

The whine of the kettle climbed into the higher register and went over, and André made tea in three cups from a teabag in each, and brought one to Adaeze and one to Eva and kept one for himself, and Adaeze took it with both hands and let it warm her, and André, sitting on the corner of the third desk, looked at her not quite directly and said: "Therèse will tell you, when she comes, what she will tell you. We will not, before that, tell you anything she has not given us leave to. I will only say — and I would, in your situation, want to know this — that we are very glad you have come. We are not in the habit of asking citizens to do what we have asked you to do. We had not expected to do it in our lifetimes. We are, the four of us in this office, very sorry it has fallen to you."

"Yes," Adaeze said. "Thank you."

He nodded, and drank his tea.

Therèse came in the early afternoon, with the rain a little harder than it had been in the morning, and the grey of her coat slightly darker for being wet at the shoulders. She came in by the front door, hung the coat, knocked once at the door of the room with the three desks, and put her head in.

"You are here," she said.

"I am here."

"Good."

She did not say anything more in greeting; she said nothing of the missing-you of the platform; she sat in one of the chairs that complained and waited for it to complain and then ignored it. André set a cup of tea in front of her and she took it and held it and said:

"Eva. Show us the paper."

Eva turned the laptop on her desk a quarter so that it faced into the room, and André pulled a chair over to it for Adaeze, and Adaeze sat down where she could see the screen.

It was a preprint.

It was on a server Adaeze did not recognize, in the layout of the academic-preprint conventions of the wider scholarly internet, which Adaeze had encountered three or four times in her own life when looking up the literature on otter parasites. The header was in a plain serif. The title across the top read:

On the closure-stability of anti-permissive procedural cognitions in long-duration refusal bodies.

She did not, of course, know what that meant.

"It is not what it says it is," Eva said, gently. "Or rather — it *is* what it says it is. But the field of inquiry the title names is small enough that there are, in the world, perhaps a hundred and twenty serious working scholars in it, and none of them write the sentences that are in the body of this paper. The sentences in the body of this paper are written by someone who has spent a great deal of time inside a small set of ideas the field does not, in its public form, contain."

"All right," Adaeze said.

"The abstract is" — Eva moved her cursor — "this. Three paragraphs. I will not read them out. You will not enjoy them. The third paragraph contains, in its second sentence, a phrasing that — André."

"Yes."

"You read the third paragraph."

André leaned in. He read silently for a moment. He sat back.

"Yes."

"Yes," Eva said. "So we are agreed."

"Agreed about what," Adaeze said.

"It is a draft," Eva said. "Of part of the architecture. Disguised as a scholarly contribution to a field that does not exist, quite. They have used real journals' formatting; they have salted in three citations to real working papers; they have written an abstract that, to a regular reader, will read as competent if eccentric institutional theory. To us — to anyone who has read the document under your hand at the Repository — it is the second lemma of the third section. They have it. Not all of it. They have one of the three legs of it. The leg is set down clearly. The legs they do not have are in the part of the paper that says *future work*."

Adaeze let her hands rest on her knees.

"They are not hiding," she said.

"They are not hiding," Eva said. "They are saying *we are coming. Look at us.* This is the first thing they have put into the world that admits to itself."

"Yes."

"There is one other thing," Eva said.

She scrolled down.

The corresponding-author block was at the foot of the first page, in a slightly smaller type. The author was listed under a name that read like the kind of name a postdoc might have — *J. P. Halloran* — at an institution Adaeze had not heard of, and the email address was *halloran@* a domain Adaeze also did not recognize. None of it was, in itself, particular.

Eva clicked the download icon, and a separate window of the PDF opened, and she scrolled to the very end of the paper where, after the references, the page bore a small

house-style colophon — the kind of ornamental mark some academic templates carry without anyone noticing.

The colophon was a circle, with a line through it.

Adaeze sat very still.

"I — " she said.

"Take your time," André said.

She did not, for a moment, say anything else.

She had — she steadied the memory the way she had steadied the memory of the rainy Thursday all those years ago — she had seen this mark twice in her life before yesterday. She counted, to be sure, and there were two. The first had been the day they cleared Mama Nneka's small back room, twelve years ago, the week of the funeral. The second had been yesterday, at the head of page i.

She told them about it.

She told them that they had cleared the room together, she and Iyanna and their mother — the mother had still been alive then — and that in a small wooden box on the top of the wardrobe they had found cards and letters from forty years' worth of birthdays. That most of the cards had been from people whose names she knew. That there had been a particular small white card, signed *with love, your CYPRIAN*, that she had not understood at the time, because no one in the family had been named Cyprian, and that the card had had, in its upper-right corner, the small printed mark of a circle with a line through it. That she had thought, briefly, that *Cyprian* must be a friend's nickname, and put the card back in the box, and the box back on the wardrobe. That she did not, now, know where the box was.

"Iyanna will know," she said, hearing herself.

"Yes," André said, gently.

"You have," Therèse said, "perhaps three other code names you would have heard, growing up. Do you remember any."

"I — " Adaeze said. "I don't think I — "

"Take your time."

She took her time.

She closed her eyes.

She thought of the small wooden box, the dust on its top, the smell of the cedar that Mama Nneka had put in it against insects forty years ago; she thought of the cards going past her hand one at a time. She heard Iyanna behind her saying — Iyanna had read aloud the ones she had liked — Iyanna had read out, that day, two names that had made her laugh, because they were names you did not name a person, you named a hymn or a girl in an old book, and she had laughed in the way one laughs at the foot of a wardrobe in the week of a funeral, which is not a real laugh.

"Felicity," Adaeze said.

"Yes."

"Perpetua."

"Yes."

"Hippolytus."

"Yes."

"Cyprian was on the one I just told you about."

"Yes."

"That is four."

"Yes."

There was a small silence.

"Your grandmother," Eva said, "was Perpetua."

"Yes," Adaeze said. "I had — when she said the name on page i I thought — I had heard it. Yes. Yes. I had not known I had heard it."

"It is how she signed her own letters to the others," André said. "Up to about a year before she stopped writing. We have a few. We did not — we do not, as a rule, keep what was not given to us. We were given a small number of them by your grandmother herself, in her last year. She used the name. She wanted us to recognize the name if we ever heard it again."

"And now," Adaeze said, "you have heard it again."

"Now we have heard it again."

The kettle, on the shelf, had cooled. The rain on the window outside had thinned slightly. Eva closed the PDF on her laptop and turned the laptop a quarter back toward her own desk, and folded her hands in her lap, and looked at Adaeze the way Therèse had looked at her at the visitor's gate the morning before yesterday, which already, today, was a long time ago.

"I am sorry," Eva said. "It is the first thing they have given us, and they have given it to us by your grandmother's name."

"Yes."

"They are saying it to her. They are saying it to her, through us, through you."

"Yes," Adaeze said. "I had — yes."

Therèse stood, with the contained motion of a person who has decided the worst of a thing is over and the next of it not yet begun.

"There is a room," she said, "upstairs. André will show you. Eva will, in the next hour, send your sister a small unattributable note about the cat and the rosemary, which I would be grateful if you would not refuse on principle. We are not — we will not — make any further request of you today. Tomorrow we will sit at this desk and we will start.

Today you have done enough."

"All right," Adaeze said.

She stood.

She picked up her cup, which she had not finished, and she carried it with her out of the room and up the narrow stair behind André, and at the top of the stair André opened the door of an attic room with a sloped ceiling and a clean bed and a writing-table and a window onto the rooftops of Brussels and the grey rain on them, and he set her bag — which someone, at some point, had brought up — on the chair beside the bed, and he stepped out, and he closed the door behind him.

Adaeze sat down on the edge of the bed with the cup of cold tea in her hands.

After a long while she said, to the room: *Perpetua*.

The room did not say anything back.

Chapter Six

The Quiet Catalog

She woke at the colour of the rooftops of Brussels.

The window took the colour first — pale grey, a shade paler than the slate of the houses opposite, which was itself paler than it had been in the night, by some degree the morning had brought; and then the table took it, and the sloped ceiling; and then she was awake. The cup of yesterday's tea stood where she had set it before she lay down on the bed without taking off the cardigan — which she had, in the night, taken off after all, since it was now folded over the back of the chair. She did not remember folding it.

She lay for a moment.

She put her hand against her own chest, at the place where, in the pocket of the cardigan if she were wearing it, the folded paper from her grandmother would have been against her heart. The paper was not against her heart. The cardigan was on the chair. She felt for the absence of it with a kind of body-attention she had not, in her life, had to develop before, and the same attention told her that the paper had never been the protection she had taken it for. The protection was inside her now. It was very strange protection. It did not protect.

She got up.

She washed her face in a small basin in the corner of the attic and put on the cardigan again and tucked the paper

back where the paper went and went down the stairs.

The spoke was already at work.

Eva was at the laptop. André was at the corner of his own desk, on a phone, saying *yes, yes, I do see, yes,* and not, audibly, anything else. The chair by the window was empty. There was a fresh kettle's worth of tea steaming on the shelf and a clean cup beside it that nobody had touched. The tin of biscuits was open. There was, today, on the third desk, a man in a thick jumper with both elbows on the desk and a great deal of paperwork in front of him; he looked up when she came in and inclined his head and went back to his paperwork without speaking.

Lukasz, she understood, without needing to be told.

"Tea," Eva said, without looking up.

"Yes."

"There, the cup. Today's tea is better. It is André's day for tea."

"It is always André's day for tea," Lukasz said, into his paperwork.

"It is André's day for tea every day there is tea," Eva said.

Adaeze poured herself a cup.

Therèse came in by the front door at ten past nine, in the dry shoulders of a coat that had been hung overnight, and said, before she had set down anything: "I am going to take Adaeze out for an hour. There is a thing she should see while she is at the spoke. We will be back by lunch."

"All right," Eva said.

"All right," André said, putting his hand briefly over the receiver of the phone and uncovering it again.

"You will be all right with Lukasz."

"We will be all right with Lukasz," Eva said.

"I am the kind of person," Lukasz said, "who is excellent to be all right with."

"Yes," Therèse said. She did not, here, do the thing her face nearly did. "Adaeze, drink your tea. We will go in fifteen minutes."

Adaeze drank her tea.

When she had finished it, and rinsed her cup at the small basin in the back kitchen which she had not, until that moment, noticed had been there, she put her shoes on at the front door, and the rain was holding off, and Therèse, in the grey coat that did not now believe in being a coat for any particular season, opened the door for her without comment.

They walked.

The morning had decided, at last, to be a morning. The sky was high and full of the kind of weather it had been working up to all night. They walked along the canal in the same direction in which the tram had come the day before, and then they turned south at the church Adaeze recognized from yesterday by its scaffolded glazier's pane, which was now in, and unscaffolded, and the colour of a window recently bought; and the next square held a Saturday market that was not, today, Saturday, with three stalls selling cheeses Adaeze did not know the names of and a fourth stall selling, of all things, a bucket of cut peonies in pinks of three intensities; and the woman at the peonies stall was reading a paperback with her elbow on the corner of the bucket; and past the square Therèse stopped at a corner Adaeze had not, herself, noticed they were coming to, and said:

"There."

Adaeze looked.

It was the same low pale stone. It was, in shape, exactly the same shape as the one in the city of pale stone and a low river, only the half. It was the half a dome that would be made if you cut a great low dome down its middle and took only the south half away — a wide low rise of stone, four streets long, sitting against the city without ceremony, ordinary streets running up to its edge and stopping there without remark.

There were doors at the four cardinal points, although the cardinal points of this half-dome were not the cardinal points of the world — they were the cardinal points of the half-dome itself. Two of the doors were on the long side that faced the square. Two were on the short sides at either end. There were no steps. There were no guards. People were going in and people were coming out, in the absent traffic of a building that did not insist on being noticed.

"Is it — " Adaeze said.

"Yes."

"There is one in every city?"

"There is one in every city that wanted one. There were not — when the first ones were built — there was not a plan that there should be one in every city. There was a plan that there should be one in the city of pale stone, and a hope that the cities of the world would, on seeing it, wish to build their own. Most of them did. Some of them did not, and they have other buildings that do the same work in different shapes. We are not, in this matter, doctrinaire. The shapes are local. The work is what is shared."

"And in each one of them," Adaeze said, "the dome — "

"Yes."

"And in each one of them, beneath the dome — "

"No," Therèse said. "There is only one of those. There is, only, the one room. The one room is in the city of pale stone. The dome here, like the dome in every other Repository, is what it appears to be. The shelves are the shelves. Every text in human writing is on those shelves, here, in Brussels, on a Wednesday morning, for any human being to take down. There is no second room under this floor. There is no second room under any floor except the one floor. We have made — we made it this way — exactly one place at which the dome is not, locally, what it appears to be. We have done it once. We have committed to doing it only once."

She paused.

"We have not always been certain," she said, "that this is wiser than doing it nowhere. It would, in some sense, be a cleaner argument to do it nowhere. But the one in the city of pale stone is what is between the world and the disease that does not, since we built it, have a name in any newspaper. So we have it. And so we have, also, all of these."

"Yes," Adaeze said.

She did not, for some time, move toward the doors.

Therèse waited.

The peonies-woman in the square behind them turned a page of her paperback and laid her hand against the bucket again. A pair of older men crossed in front of them holding the corners of a long wrapped object between them, possibly a roll of carpet, possibly a length of pipe, possibly something they did not, themselves, know the name of. The morning continued to behave like a morning.

"All right," Adaeze said.

They went in.

It was the same room as the one in the city of pale stone, in the same way that one's grandmother's house is the same

house as a great-aunt's house — built by the same family, in the same idiom, with the same instincts about doors and windows and ceiling-height — but smaller, and with a different smell, and with the small differences a different climate writes into a building over fifty years. The stacks went out from where they stood, in every direction, for a smaller distance than they had at the central one. The light fell from a smaller perimeter of high openings. The floor was tile, not stone, but the tile was warm.

There were perhaps thirty people in the room, and what struck Adaeze, standing in the door of the most serious building she had ever entered, was how few of them were being serious.

A man slept in an armchair with a book open on his chest, rising and falling; from the cover, before she looked away, it was a thriller, the title embossed in foil, a gun on it. A boy of about twelve had a great atlas open not to read but to find his own town, and was leaning so close his nose nearly touched the page, and then sat back satisfied, as if the town being printed there confirmed something about himself. Two girls shared one chair and one screen and were, very plainly, not reading anything the building had provided; one of them laughed and the other shushed her and then laughed too. An old man held a newspaper at arm's length and moved his lips. A young woman with the focused misery of an examination somewhere ahead of her had built a wall of textbooks around herself and was eating, illicitly and one at a time, peanuts from a twist of paper in her lap, glancing up between each. A man in a good coat read what looked like poetry and seemed to want to be seen reading it. Someone, somewhere in the stacks, was clipping their nails — she could hear it, the small precise sound, and so could the old

man, who lowered the newspaper to locate the offender and, failing, raised it again.

And among them, threading the aisles with a soft trolley, a woman in the grey-blue coverall of the building's own staff reshelved returns, crouching, rising, sliding each book home with the back of two fingers, unhurried, invisible to every reader she passed — keeping the place in order around their idleness and their study and their love and their nail-clipping, so that tomorrow it would all still be here, in order, for whoever came.

There were the serious ones too. A woman at a long table compared three open volumes line by line with an old scholar's patience. A teenager in a hooded jumper sat on the floor with her back to a shelf, holding a fat book close to her face, gone entirely out of the room into it. And at one table a man and a woman were not, technically, reading at all — each had an unopened book in front of them, for cover, and they were holding hands across the wood and looking at each other the way people look at one moment in a life when the words can wait.

There was, in a corner, a child.

The child was perhaps six. She had on a yellow plastic raincoat she had not unbuttoned, and she had on, around her neck, the kind of small drawstring bag schoolchildren wear in countries where schools want each child to be able to carry a particular pencil. She was cross-legged on a brown cushion in the corner of the children's area, which was an area only by virtue of having lower shelves; there was no sign that said *children,* and no librarian guarding the shelves. The child had taken down a book that was, in the broad way that children's books are, illustrated. The illustrations, Adaeze could see from where she stood, were the warm

pale-blues and white-yellows of a particular kind of northern light.

The text of the book was in a language Adaeze did not recognize.

She knew, watching the child read, that she did not recognize it because she did not recognize the *shape* of the words; the words were not Latinate, were not Cyrillic, were not in any of the broad families she could place by their outline. There were strokes whose rules she did not know, and letters carrying marks above them whose rules she did not know either, and the rhythm of the sentences, as her eye took them in without trying to read them, was a rhythm she had not heard before.

She watched the child read.

The child read in the absorbed way children read, with one finger tracing the line and her lips moving very slightly. She read for a long time. She did not look up. She did not call to anyone. She did not show the book to anyone. She had, at some point before Adaeze had come in, been given permission to take this book down and read it in this corner on this cushion, and the permission had been so unremarkable that the child had not, in any visible part of herself, registered receiving it.

Adaeze, who had been a child in a city of a different colour, had not, in her childhood, ever sat in such a corner.

She had, in her childhood, read books, of course. She had read what her mother had bought her and what Mama Nneka had given her and what her school had assigned her and, once, when she had been ten and had wanted very badly to know how an otter's ear worked, a book a librarian at her school had let her borrow on a particular kind of overnight loan because the school did not, normally, lend

the encyclopedias out. She had had to ask. She had had to be given. She had not, in her own life, ever taken a book down off a shelf in a building she had walked in off the street into without anyone caring whether she could read the language of it.

The child in the yellow raincoat turned a page.

Adaeze stood for some time.

She thought, then, of the dressed-stone stairwell, and the chapel blankness of its walls, which she had read, even on the way down, as the work of someone who had decided. She thought of the table, and the two chairs, and the folio open on it. She thought of page i, and of the shape of page ii.

She thought of the architecture which she now carried in herself like a particular piece of furniture in a room.

She thought of the child reading in the language Adaeze did not know.

The two thoughts did not, at first, sit easily together; they were of two different sizes; they had been written in two different scripts; she had to hold them, for a moment, with both hands, the way one holds the corners of two pages on a desk that has the breeze going across it. Then they settled.

It was not, in the end, a long realization.

The door she could open with her name was the door without which this child did not have this book. The one room kept shut was what kept all these other rooms open — the idle man, the vain one, the girls and their screen, the nail-clipper, the woman reshelving it all so it would still be here tomorrow. The architects had kept exactly one thing, and not two, and not seven, and not all of it; and the discipline of keeping exactly one was, perhaps, the only discipline by which the rest could be kept true. Keep two, and in fifty years you keep four. Keep four, and in a hundred

you keep everything.

The dome was true.

It was not true in spite of the room. It was true because of it.

She did not — she was clear about this; she registered it as she stood in the corner — like the realization. She did not want it to be the answer. She would have preferred the answer to be a different shape. She would have preferred to have been able to say, here, in this room, on this morning, watching this child: the room beneath the city of pale stone is a mistake, and the dome would be more itself without it, and the architects were sentimental old people who frightened themselves into a wrong door. She would have preferred to leave the building thinking that.

She did not leave the building thinking that.

She let the child finish her page.

The child closed the book, with the patient attention of someone who has finished a chapter and is about to begin another and wants, first, to set down the book and stretch her hands, which she did; and Adaeze, who had no relationship to the child, who had not spoken to the child, who had not, in fact, been seen by the child, felt that she had owed the child a small private dignity in not interrupting the chapter.

The child opened the book again at the next page.

Adaeze turned, then, and went to find Therèse.

Therèse was at one of the long tables, two rows away, with a closed book of her own in front of her that she had not, herself, opened. She was looking at the long perimeter of high openings, and at the way the light came in through them. When Adaeze sat down opposite her, she did not, at first, turn her face from the light.

"Are you all right," Therèse said.

"Yes," Adaeze said.

Therèse turned her face from the light, then, and looked at Adaeze, and Adaeze saw — without needing to be told, in the way one sees these things at this distance across an old wooden table — that Therèse had once, herself, in a different city, in a different year, on a different morning, sat for some time in the corner of a building like this one and watched a child read in a language she did not know.

"All right," Therèse said.

They sat there for some time without speaking.

After a while Therèse said, very mildly: "There is, two streets from here, a bakery that is open until eleven and that does, between nine and ten, a particular small bun with a fig in it that has, in the eight years I have known it, never been less than the best fig bun I have eaten in any city. We have, today, time to walk past it on the way back."

"All right," Adaeze said.

They stood. They left the book Therèse had taken down on the table for the librarians to reshelve. They walked back through the stacks toward the door, and Adaeze did not look back at the child, although she felt the child where she had left her, behind her in the corner; and they came out onto the square, where the woman at the peonies stall had not, by any visible amount, turned a further page of her paperback; and they walked along the canal, the dry way, in a small quiet companionable silence; and the fig bun, when they got to it, was, for what it was worth, the best fig bun Adaeze had ever eaten in any city.

Chapter Seven

The Name on the Card

They came back to the spoke from the bakery a little after eleven.

The rain had not, in their absence, started again, but the sky had decided it would; the canal had a small wind on it that lifted the surface in patches of the kind a fisherman would have called *cat's-paws* if there had been a fisherman on the bank. There was not. There was, on the pavement at the corner of the spoke's row of doors, a small cat — orange, with a notch out of one ear — that watched Therèse and Adaeze go past without expressing any opinion on them. Therèse looked at the cat. The cat looked at Therèse. The cat decided that the matter was concluded.

Inside, the spoke was the spoke. André was still on the phone, though now with the other elbow on the desk. Eva was at the laptop in the same posture in which they had left her, with a different pen now, and was making, in a notebook, the kind of careful notes one makes when one has stopped looking up between sentences. The kettle on the shelf had been refilled. Lukasz was at the third desk, which had been cleared of most of his paperwork; he had brought the tray of post down off the shelf and was working through it.

There was a small stack to his left of envelopes opened.

There was a smaller stack to his right of envelopes opened, slit, and pinned with a paperclip to a printed-out

form that Adaeze took, on second look, to be some kind of triage docket.

There was, in front of him, a single card.

The card was unopened — it was a postcard, not an envelope, but he had not, with this one, written anything on the printed-out form. He had set it square on the desk in front of him with both his hands flat to either side of it, as one sets down a thing one is not, until further instruction, prepared to handle.

He did not look up.

"Therèse," he said. "There is one for you."

Therèse stopped, two steps in from the door, with the grey coat half off her shoulders.

"Hand-addressed?" she said.

"Yes."

"To this address?"

"To the spoke. By a name we use."

Eva, at the laptop, had not, on the surface, changed anything she was doing; she had only laid the pen down beside the notebook with a quiet care. André, on the phone, said *I will call you back* into the receiver in the particular flat voice of a person whose attention was, suddenly, elsewhere, and put the receiver down.

Therèse finished taking off the coat. She hung it on the peg in the hallway. She came back into the room. She sat down in the chair by the window — Adaeze's chair, the one that did not complain — and she set her hands on her knees, and she looked at Lukasz, and Lukasz handed her the postcard.

She looked at the back of it first, for a long moment, without moving.

Then she turned it over and looked at the front, and turned it back and looked at the message again, slowly, each motion deliberate — the way one is taught, in a certain kind of training, to handle a thing one has reason to suspect one would rather not be holding.

She set the postcard down on the table between herself and Lukasz, face down, with her hand flat over it.

"All right," she said.

Lukasz did not say anything. He had, Adaeze realized, in the spare economy of motion in which he did everything, already stood; he had walked, while Therèse had been turning the card, to the shelf, and he had unplugged the kettle from the wall, and he had set it down on the counter beside the tin of biscuits, and the kettle was sitting on the counter looking unplugged, and Lukasz was standing beside it looking at it. He did not touch it again. He stood beside it.

This was, Adaeze understood with a small interior coldness, a procedure she did not know.

"Eva," Therèse said.

"Yes."

"Read it."

Eva came over to the desk by the window. She did not pick the card up. She bent over Therèse's shoulder. She read it without moving her lips.

After a moment she said, very quietly: "All right."

"Yes," Therèse said.

"That is — "

"Yes."

"All right."

Eva went back to her own desk and sat down. She did not, this time, pick up the pen.

Adaeze had not yet, herself, moved. She was at the doorway of the room with the door behind her still open and the small grey rain not having started yet on the pavement behind her, with her hands in the pockets of the cardigan and the fig bun, two streets ago, already a long time ago.

"Adaeze," Therèse said. "Come in. Sit down. I would be grateful, if you would, to read it with me. I would rather not say it out loud the first time. I would rather we both look at it together."

"All right," Adaeze said.

She came in. André pulled a chair over to the desk by the window for her. She sat down. Therèse turned the postcard over and slid it across to where Adaeze could see it without picking it up.

The picture-side of the postcard was a photograph, slightly faded by some years on a postcard rack, of a small mountain lake at dusk. The lake was the colour of unlit pewter. There were no people in the photograph. There were no buildings. In the foreground, on a thin strip of shore, there was a small wooden bench painted green. There was, in the upper-right corner of the picture, the lake's name in white, in a typeface no one had used since perhaps 1995 — a lake Adaeze had never heard of, in a country she could, from the type alone, narrow to a region but not name.

Then the message-side.

The address took up the right half: *Therèse Vanderhoek, Care of the Spoke, Brussels*. Hand-written, in pen, in a hand that had — Adaeze could see it even unprepared — the marks of a person who had taught themselves to write rapidly and small. The letters leaned the opposite way to Mama Nneka's. The stamp in the corner was from a country whose postage Adaeze did not know, a small denomination, the kind one

buys for a postcard.

The message on the left half of the back was eight words long. It was in the same hand. It was:

Greetings from somewhere quiet. Thinking about the kettle.

It was signed with a single letter: *D*.

Adaeze read it.

She read it again.

She looked up at Therèse.

Therèse did not, at first, say anything.

The kettle that Lukasz had unplugged sat on the counter. The kettle in question was, very clearly, the kettle in question. The kettle's plastic body, going slightly yellow at the seams, had on it nothing else of any note. The handle was scored. The switch was at rest in the off position. The kettle was, for what it was worth, the kettle.

"That is his hand," Therèse said.

"Yes," Adaeze said, although it was not, of course, her *yes* to say.

"That is his hand and that is — that is *the* kettle. He was, in this office, in the year he left, the one who said we needed a new kettle. He came in one morning with this one. He had bought it at a stall on the canal. He paid for it with a note he had kept folded in his wallet for months — a thing he had decided he could afford, and then made himself afford. It was his."

From the counter, very quietly, Lukasz said: "I have been descaling Davor's kettle for fifteen years." He was still standing beside it, where he had set it down unplugged. He did not look at it now. "I did not know it was Davor's. I knew it was the kettle. They told me, when I came, *do not let anyone retire the kettle,* and I thought it was a joke this

office had, the way an office has a joke. I have taken the lime out of it four times. I have replaced the element once, myself, with a part I had to send away for, because the man who left it bought a model they stopped making." He was quiet a moment. "You spend fifteen years keeping a thing alive because someone told you to and you do not ask whose it was. And then a card comes." He put the back of one finger against the kettle's cold plastic flank, once, the way you touch the side of an animal to tell it you are there, and took the finger away.

She put her hand over the back of the card. The hand, Adaeze saw, was trembling at the wrist in the particular way a hand trembles when it has rested a long while on a surface that has been, the whole while, slightly cold.

Therèse had not, in Adaeze's hearing, raised her voice once in their entire short acquaintance. She did not now. She said only:

"Davor."

"Yes," Lukasz said, from the shelf.

"He has not been — he was not — " Therèse stopped. She lifted her hand from the back of the card. She set it on her knee. "He left," she said, more quietly. "Fifteen years ago. Of his own choosing. He told us, before he left, that he would not be in touch. He has not been. We had not — André, we had not, had we, any signal that he was — "

"None," André said.

"None."

"All right."

The cat outside, in the corner of the row of doors, had moved to a slightly different patch of pavement, in pursuit of a slightly different patch of sun than the one in which she had been sitting. The wind on the canal had taken the

cat's-paws off and was working, now, on bringing a small thoughtful rain over from the harbour. Across the room, the laptop on Eva's desk had gone, while no one was attending to it, into its low sleep, and the small light on its edge was breathing.

"It could be," Eva said, mildly, into her own folded hands, "any of three things."

"Yes," Therèse said.

"It could be," Eva said, "that he is one of them."

"Yes."

"It could be that he is not one of them, and that he has — that he has, somehow, heard — and that this is the most circumspect signal he is capable of sending without becoming a thing he does not want to become."

"Yes."

"It could be that someone with sufficient knowledge of his life, and of ours, has imitated his hand to a degree of fidelity that I cannot, sitting here this morning, distinguish from his hand."

"Yes."

"I cannot, sitting here this morning," Eva said, "distinguish."

"No," Therèse said. "I think — I think it is his."

"I think it may be his."

"But the third possibility is not, mathematically, zero."

"It is not zero," Eva said.

There was a pause, in which Lukasz, from the counter, said: "And the kettle."

"And the kettle," Therèse said.

"It is, on the table here," Lukasz said, "an information they were not, even on the most generous reading of the preprint, in a position to have. They do not have it from us.

They have it from him."

"They have it from him," Therèse said. "Or they have him."

She put both hands flat on the desk on either side of the postcard.

She did not, for a long moment, look at anything in particular.

Adaeze had, in the course of her life, been afraid of a small number of things, in a small number of ways: she had been afraid the first time an otter bit her hand and she had not yet known whether the otter was making a point or a mistake; she had been afraid the morning she took the call about Mama Nneka; she had been afraid, yesterday, in the corner of the Brussels Repository, when she failed to talk herself out of the realization she had come to about the room. And she had watched others be afraid, a handful of times, each one its own: Iyanna the night their mother was admitted to a hospital for the last time; Eze the day the cataracted seal had nearly drowned in a routine procedure; her own mother, twice, in twenty years.

She had not, until this morning, watched Therèse Vanderhoek be afraid.

It did not look the way Adaeze would have expected. It did not look like the fear of a person being asked to do something difficult. It looked, instead, like the fear of a person being asked to *know* something difficult — like the fear of a person who had, with great care, organized their working life around the assumption that they would not have to know a particular thing, and who had, this morning, been told that the assumption had not held. Therèse, who was a procedural person, was being asked to file a procedure she did not have the form for.

It was the first time, in Adaeze's hearing, that Therèse had said the same word three times in succession.

It was the first time, in Adaeze's looking, that Therèse had had to lift her hand from a table to make it stop trembling.

Adaeze did not, in the moment, say anything. She did not put her hand on Therèse's hand. She did not say a thing of comfort. She stood up, from the chair Therèse had given her, and she went to the shelf where the kettle was, and she stood beside Lukasz, and after a moment she said to Lukasz, very quietly:

"May I plug it back in."

Lukasz looked at her. He had — she registered, with a small surprise — the kind of pale face that had, in the last half hour, gone slightly paler.

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "Yes, you may."

She plugged it in. She pressed the switch. The kettle made the sound a kettle makes when it has been left to consider its work and is now asked to resume it. Adaeze took down three more cups from the shelf. She did not, while she was doing this, look at anyone in the room. She set the cups in a row on the counter beside the open tin of biscuits. She put a teabag in each. She waited for the kettle to climb into the higher register and go over.

Behind her, very quietly, Therèse said: "Thank you, Adaeze."

"You are welcome," Adaeze said.

The kettle went over. She poured.

She brought the first cup to Therèse, with both hands, and she set it down on the desk by the window beside the postcard, which Therèse had, at some point, turned face-down again. She brought the second cup to Eva, who took it with both hands and held it without drinking from it.

She brought the third cup to André, who said *thank you, my dear,* which she registered, at the time, as the first endearment he had used in her hearing. She took her own cup back to the chair Therèse had given her and she sat with it.

For some minutes no one spoke.

Therèse, eventually, picked her cup up. She held it. She did not drink from it. She set it down.

"I am going to walk," she said.

"All right," André said.

"I will be back in an hour."

"All right."

"Adaeze."

"Yes."

"Stay here. Eva will keep you company. I would, if you would, prefer that you not be alone for that hour. I will be back in an hour. We will then, with the rest of the day, decide what to do."

"All right."

Therèse stood. She took the grey coat off the peg in the hallway and put it on. She did not, in the hallway, do up the buttons. She opened the front door. The cat with the notched ear had, in the last half hour, gone elsewhere. The thoughtful rain over the harbour had begun, in a small experimental way, to arrive. Therèse stood in the doorway and looked, for a moment, at the pavement.

She closed the door behind her.

In the room with the three desks Eva said, gently: "Adaeze. You did, in fact, a thing right just now."

"Did I."

"You made the tea."

"I — yes."

"It is what one does," Eva said. "It is what one does here. There is not, in fact, a procedure for the thing that has happened this morning. There is, in our work, often not. The procedure is the tea. The procedure is the kettle. You may not have known it, but you have done the thing the building does."

"I — " Adaeze said.

Eva, behind her desk, who looked tired in a way she had not looked when they had come in from the bakery, picked up her cup with both hands and drank from it, and Adaeze did the same; and they sat there in the room with the three desks and the still-warm kettle, and waited for the hour.

Part Two

The Carrying

She learns the door from the inside. She learns its cost. She is offered the other side.

Chapter Eight

Davor

Therèse, when she came back from her hour by the canal, came back composed.

She was not, Adaeze understood at once, composed in the way that grief is composed — she had not gone through the door of her fear and out the other side of it; she had only put the door on a hinge and learned how to close it again. The face of her composure was, in fact, sadder than the face of her fear had been. Composure was the more elaborate of the two postures.

She came in by the front door, hung the wet coat on the peg in the hallway, said *all right* to no one in particular, and went to her own desk. André made her a fresh cup of tea without being asked, which she accepted with both hands. Lukasz, at his third desk, was — Adaeze saw — back at the triage docket, having handled the morning's other post in some other order. Eva had taken the postcard up off the desk by the window and had set it, face-down, in a transparent sleeve in a drawer.

"We go in the morning," Therèse said.

She did not specify, in the moment, who *we* were.

"All right," André said.

"He will be," Therèse said, "in his shop. He will be at work. He has been at work, every morning, by half past seven, for fifteen years. There is no reason to suppose tomorrow will be the exception."

"You know where the shop is."

"I have always known where the shop is." She said this with the particular flatness of a person who, having said a thing she had not, until this morning, ever wanted to say aloud, was determining to say it without further softening. "We do not, as a rule, lose people. We do not follow them. We do not interfere. We know where they are because it is not, in the end, possible *not* to know where they are. There are not so many of us. The world is not so large. We know who is in which town. I have not, in fifteen years, gone to the town. I have not, in fifteen years, written to him. I have known. He has, I would imagine, known that I have known. That was the arrangement."

"All right," André said.

"I have not — " Therèse stopped, briefly. "I have not asked Eva or Lukasz or you to come. I am going alone, with Adaeze."

"All right," André said.

"You will hold the rest of the building."

"We will hold the rest of the building."

"Good."

She drank her tea.

Adaeze, in the chair by the window, with her own cup empty on the desk in front of her, did not say anything for some time. She was watching the rain on the window of the room with the three desks — the small thoughtful Brussels rain had, in the course of Therèse's walk, become a longer rain, which was now beginning to consider whether to be an afternoon rain, which from Adaeze's reading of the sky over the canal, it would.

After a while she said: "Therèse."

"Yes."

"What is his shop."

"It is a printing press," Therèse said. "Small. He does, in it, the kind of work a country town asks of its press — wedding cards, the parish bulletin for the church across the square, posters for the May fair. He does, in addition, work he chooses for himself. Short editions of poetry. The annual lecture of the regional historical society. A book of cheese recipes that the village wished to put out twelve years ago and that, since he undertook to print, has, by his own quiet effort, sold to perhaps four thousand people. He sets the type by hand. He keeps two machines, one of which is older than he is. He has, in fifteen years, never advertised. He does not need to."

"He chose well," Adaeze said.

"He chose well. He chose what he is suited to. He chose, also, what permitted him to keep, in his own life, the kind of attention he had decided to keep. We were not — I do not think any of us, the day he left, were surprised when we heard, six months later, what he had taken up. It would not have been surprising on any of the days he was here with us, either."

She drank again from her cup.

"His name on the shop is *Imprimerie Lambeau,*" she said, after a moment. "He is, in the town, Monsieur Lambeau. The town knows him as a quiet foreigner who has been there a long time. They are fond of him. They are not, I think, in any particular hurry to know more than they know."

"All right," Adaeze said.

In the morning they took the seven o'clock train.

It was a small train, of two carriages, that ran east out of Brussels in the direction of the Ardennes, and that stopped

at the kind of small stations whose names Adaeze did not, on hearing them announced, retain. The light was the light of a Belgian morning after a night of rain — pale, washed, very clear; the fields they passed stood full of water in the low places, and the cows in them were the brown-and-white cows Adaeze had seen, in her life, only in photographs. Therèse, in her seat beside the window, did not, on the journey, sleep. She did not read. She did not look at her phone, which Adaeze had not, in any of the morning's preceding hours, ever seen her hold. She looked out at the fields. She held her hands in her lap.

At a small town whose name Adaeze did not retain they got off the train, and at the station Therèse spoke briefly in French to a man in a fluorescent vest who pointed up the road, and they walked up the road for what was, in the end, only ten minutes. The town was the colour of slate and the colour of pale stone in roughly equal measure. It had a square with a church on one side and a war memorial in the centre. It had three streets meeting the square. It had, on one of those streets, set back, a small shop, with a low window of dressed wood and gold lettering that read, in a careful hand, *Imprimerie Lambeau,* and below it, smaller, *Travaux d'impression et compositions sur mesure,* and below that, smaller still, a printed schedule of hours that began at half past seven on weekdays.

It was, at this hour, twenty past nine.

The door of the shop was propped open with a small flat stone.

Therèse stopped, on the pavement, for a long moment.

"Adaeze," she said.

"Yes."

"I am going to do a thing I have not, in many years, done."

"Yes."

"I am going to walk into a room without having sent ahead, and I am going to ask a thing of a person I have not, for fifteen years, asked anything of. I would like — I would like to say to you, before we go in — that this is unusual for me. That I am, by walking into this room, breaking a small private rule I had set down for myself, and that I am breaking it because I do not, today, see another way. I would like you to know that this is the cost. The cost is not, I think, you will notice it. I would, however, prefer not to be the only person in the room who knows."

"All right," Adaeze said.

"Thank you."

They went in.

The shop smelled of ink and of paper and of a third thing Adaeze did not, at first, identify and then placed as the specific smell of a wood stove damped down, perhaps an hour ago, for the day. The front room had a counter, and a shelf, and a wooden chair against which a young black dog sat watching Adaeze with the expression of a dog who would, given a moment, decide whether she was the kind of visitor that warranted standing for. The shelf held a small display of printed things — a postcard of the war memorial in the square, three slim chapbooks of poetry in Walloon, the cheese-recipe book Therèse had spoken of, a calendar of regional birds. Behind the counter was a doorway, and behind the doorway, very faintly, the steady mechanical sound of someone working at type.

"Good morning," Therèse said, at the counter, in French.

The sound at the back stopped.

After a moment a man came through the doorway, wiping his hands on a cloth that was already too inky to be much use. He was in his early sixties, perhaps, with greying hair cut short, and a worn leather apron, and the kind of face that had, over a long time, settled into the lines of someone who, on most mornings, was content.

He stopped, when he saw them, in the middle of the wiping.

He had been about to say *bonjour;* the word, formed but not voiced, sat on his face. He did not say it. He did not say anything for a moment.

"Therèse," he said.

"Davor."

He looked at Therèse, then. He looked at Adaeze. He looked at Adaeze longer than he had looked at Therèse. After a moment he looked at the cloth in his hands and finished wiping his hands with it, very carefully, in the way one finishes a thing one has begun in order to give one's hands something to do, and he set the cloth down on the counter, and he set both hands flat on the counter on either side of it.

"You have brought her," he said.

"Yes."

"And you have come because of the card."

"Yes."

"And it is, then, real."

"Yes."

He nodded, once, slowly.

He turned, then, to Adaeze. He had — she saw, as he turned — the kind of pale eyes that had spent a long time in poor light, and the kind of jaw that had once, perhaps, set itself differently and had relaxed, in the years here, into another shape. He looked at her with a considered,

unhurried curiosity.

"You are Nneka's," he said.

"Yes," Adaeze said.

"I am sorry."

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

"I knew her," he said. "Not long. I was at the very back of the room. I was very young. I will not — I do not want you to think — I was not in the architecture. I was not — I was a clerk. I made notes. I made tea." He glanced, briefly, at Therèse, and the glance was an old, dry, considered glance. "I was the kettle, then. Before there was a kettle. I made the kettles before the kettle was a kettle."

"All right," Adaeze said.

"I am sorry," he said again, and this time it was — Adaeze understood — for a different thing. "I am sorry that you have had to come into a room with what you have had to come into a room with. I am sorry it is in you. I am sorry that I have, by sending a small card to a person I had told myself I would never write to again, made it more so."

"You sent the card," Therèse said.

"I sent the card."

"All right."

He looked at her, then. He did not, for a moment, say anything else.

The black dog at the chair stood up. She walked, with the deliberation of a dog who had decided that the conversation was the kind of conversation she should not abstain from any longer, to the door of the back room, and she sat down in the doorway with her tail tucked alongside her, facing in.

"Come through," Davor said. "I will make tea."

The back room was the back room of a press. There was a flat type cabinet against one wall with the drawers labelled

by font. There was a large iron platen press in the middle of the floor, with a fresh sheet of paper laid into it and the type in its bed locked and inked and ready, paused in mid-job. There was a smaller cylinder press in the corner. A wood stove against the back wall, damped down, with a kettle on its top, and beside it a low wicker chair. And against the third wall a long worktable with the clutter — paper offcuts, stoppered bottles of ink, a magnifying glass on a stand, a pair of half-eaten apples browning on a plate — that meant a person had been working there, without stopping, for hours.

The dog took up a position at the foot of the chair.

Davor went to the stove, opened the damper a notch, set the kettle on the hottest part of the top — the economical motions of a man who had made tea at this stove for fifteen years and would, all being equal, make it here for another fifteen.

"Sit," he said.

There were two stools by the worktable. Therèse and Adaeze sat.

He stood with his back to them, by the stove, until the kettle began its low warming sound. Then he turned.

"I sent the card," he said. "I have not, in the last fifteen years, sent a postcard to anyone in your office. I had not, in the last fifteen years, intended to. I had thought I would die having not done it. I had been comfortable with that thought."

"Yes," Therèse said.

"I want," he said, "to tell you what made me change my mind. I want to also tell you what I do not, myself, know about the matter, so that you do not waste your time, while I have you here, looking for things from me that I cannot give you. I am sorry to be — I am sorry to begin by listing what I

do not have. I have learned, in this job, that it saves time."

"All right," Therèse said.

"I do not know who told me about it."

He looked at his hands.

"It came to me," he said, "ten days ago, in the post. A small slip of paper, no envelope. It had been put through the letter slot at the back of the shop. It said only this: *the architecture is being re-derived. The Custody knows. They have not yet acted. You may wish to consider whether to*. It was not signed. It was not in a hand I recognized. It was not, as far as I could tell, in a hand the person who had written it ordinarily used."

He crossed to the type cabinet and pulled out a shallow drawer — the compartments inside it sorted by letter, each a little coffin of identical metal sorts — and tilted it so Adaeze could see.

"I have set type by hand for fifteen years," he said. "Before that I made notes for clever people, and before *that* — never mind. A man who sets type stops seeing words. He sees the letters. He sees that this *a* has too much shoulder and this *a* is mean about the bowl; he sees where a hand hurries and where it shows off; he sees the place in a line where the writer stopped to think, because the pressure changes, the ink pools a half-second longer. I looked at the slip the way I look at a proof. And the hand on it was *built*. Constructed. Every letter the safe average of itself, nothing leaning, nothing tired, nothing showing off — a hand made by someone who knew exactly how a hand like mine reads a hand, and gave me nothing to read. Which is itself a thing I read." He pushed the drawer shut with a soft wooden knock. "You cannot forge *nothing* by accident. It is, I am all but certain, a forgery. A careful, neutral hand designed to leave

no fingerprints. Whoever made it understood my trade well enough to defeat it. I find I am almost flattered, and I do not like being almost flattered, at my age, by a thing that frightens me."

"I sat with it for nine days. I made the bulletin for the church across the square; I did a poster for the May fair; I had supper with the schoolteacher and her husband twice as I do every week. I thought about it. I did not, on any of those nine days, decide.

"On the tenth day I made the postcard. I had a stack of old tourist postcards from years ago — I keep them; I send them, occasionally, to a small list of people — and I picked one that I knew you would, when you looked at it, find as opaque as possible. I picked the lake because there is no lake in this town. I picked the green bench because I have, in my life, never sat on a green bench. I put on it the words I put on it. I wrote — I wrote *Thinking about the kettle* because I knew that if you read it and were the person I had known, you would know I had sent it, and not anyone else. I did not put anything more in the message because I did not, in the end, have anything more I was prepared to put. I posted it from a town fourteen kilometres from here on the way to a delivery I was making. I posted it because — I posted it because I thought you should know.

"That is the entire content of my act."

He did not, for a moment, look at either of them.

The kettle on the stove had begun to climb into the higher register. He turned, opened a cupboard, took down two cups — *thé,* he said, almost to himself, *deux cuillerées* — and made the tea in a brown earthenware pot. He brought the pot to the worktable, set it down, set the two cups beside it. He poured. He gave one cup to Therèse and one to Adaeze.

He did not pour one for himself.

"You will think," he said, sitting down at last, on the low wicker chair beside the dog, "that I am — that I am one of *them*. You will have already thought this, you will have already considered it; I do not blame you. Eva — Eva will have said this in the office; I know Eva; she will have laid out the three possibilities; she will have said the third was not zero. I will tell you what I can tell you: I am not one of them. I have not, in fifteen years, been visited by anyone who might be them. I have not been written to, except by the slip ten days ago, which was either from them or from a person standing somewhere between us and them. I do not, however, expect you to believe me on my word for that. I expect you to do what your work asks you to do and to determine, by your own means, whether I am one of them. I will, in the meantime, continue to do what I would otherwise have done with my Tuesday. I will make the parish bulletin. I will mind the shop. I will be here, if you need me again, and I will not, unless you need me again, write to you a second time."

"Yes," Therèse said. "All right."

"And — " he said.

He stopped.

"And," he said, "before you go, I would like to say one thing to your granddaughter."

Adaeze, who had not yet drunk from her tea, set the cup down on the worktable in front of her.

"Yes," she said.

Davor looked at her.

"Your grandmother," he said, "was not, on the day she signed, certain that she should. I was, as I said, at the back of the room. I was a young man. I was — I was a clerk who

could be trusted not to make a noise. I saw what was in front of me and what was behind me. I saw, in particular, what was on the table.

"There was a procedure at the table. The architects had, by their own design, given themselves an option to refuse the work. They had built the option in deliberately, because they had known — as anyone working honestly on a thing like this knows — that to undertake to build what they were about to build was a thing a person should be permitted to refuse. The option was concrete. It was a small page printed before the meeting on which any of them, if they chose, could sign their refusal; the page was real; the page was on the table; the page was discussed before any of them was asked to sign the larger document.

"Your grandmother signed the small page first."

He said this very plainly, as though he were giving her a fact about her grandmother she had asked him to give her.

"She signed the small page," he said. "She said no. She said no in writing, in front of all of us. She said no, and the others read her no, and the others sat with her no, and the others asked her what would, in her judgement, be the consequence of her no. She told them. She told them carefully. They listened. The discussion took, I would guess, the better part of two hours. I made the tea three times.

"At the end of the two hours she said: *I have voted no. I do not, having voted no and having heard you all hear me, change the no. I voted no because I am not certain. I am not, at the end of these two hours, more certain. The no stands. But I will, having voted no, and only having voted no, also vote yes on the larger document. I will vote yes on the larger document because the work is going to happen with my no or without it, and because my no, recorded in*

this room, is the only thing I have to leave to whichever of mine eventually comes to read what we are about to write.

"She voted yes only because she had first been allowed to vote no.

"This is what I wanted to tell you, while you were here."

Adaeze looked, for a moment, at the worktable.

She looked, then, at her cup of tea, which she had still not drunk.

She picked it up. She drank from it. The tea was good — strong, a little bitter, made with two spoonfuls in an earthenware pot at a wood stove by a man who had made it this way for many years and would, all things being equal, make it this way for many more.

"Thank you," she said.

"You are welcome," Davor said.

He sat in the wicker chair with his hands on his knees and the dog at his feet, and he did not say anything else.

Therèse, after a time, said: "We will go, then."

"Yes."

"I will send — I will send someone, in the next day or two, to ask you a small set of questions about the slip. With your permission."

"You may send Eva."

"All right."

"Send Eva. Send only Eva. She will not, I think, make me say anything I would rather not say. She and I were, in those years, friends."

"Yes."

"And tell Lukasz," Davor said, with the very small smile of a person who, at the end of a long morning, was permitting himself the indulgence of one, "that the kettle is, I expect, still alive."

"It is alive," Therèse said.

"Tell him I am glad."

"I will tell him."

They stood. The dog stood with them. Davor walked them to the door of the front room and stood at the door with the dog beside him as they went out onto the pavement. The morning had become the day. The square in front of the church was empty except for an old woman crossing it with a basket; the war memorial in the centre of the square had a small bunch of pink flowers laid at its base that had not been there when they had come up the road. The bells in the church tower were, at that moment, beginning the small careful ringing they made at the half hour.

"Therèse," Davor said, from the doorway.

She turned.

"You will, I think," he said, "be all right."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Yes," she said.

He stepped back into the shop. The flat stone propped the door open behind him. The dog, after a moment, came to the doorway, looked at Adaeze once more, and then turned and went back into the shop after the man who had been there before Adaeze had come and would, all things being equal, be there after she had gone.

Adaeze and Therèse walked back down the road to the train.

Chapter Nine

The Procedure

"Today," Therèse said, over the breakfast that was a cup of tea and a fig bun gone slightly stale because there had not been time, yesterday, to buy fresh, "I would like you to see the ordinary work."

"The ordinary work," Adaeze said.

"Not your grandmother's matter. That is the extraordinary work; that is the work none of us, in our whole lives, expected to do, and it has made you think — I have watched you think it — that the Custody is a thing that exists in order to do it. It is not. Your grandmother's matter is the once-in-forty-years. The rest of the time we do a smaller thing, many times. I would like you to see the smaller thing. I think you cannot understand what you are inside of until you have seen what it does on an ordinary Tuesday."

"It is Tuesday?"

"It is Tuesday," Therèse said. "It is, in fact, always Tuesday, in this work. That is rather the point of it."

They took a tram.

It was a different tram from the tram that had brought Adaeze to the spoke; it went north and then east, across a Brussels that was, this morning, doing the thing Brussels did when it had decided not to rain — holding the rain in reserve, overhead, in a high even ceiling of grey that made the colours of the city very exact. They passed a school letting children into a yard. They passed a market being

taken down. At a long red light a woman got on with a cello in a soft case and stood holding it upright beside her like a tall quiet child, and got off three stops later, and the tram, in her absence, felt larger.

The room was on the second floor of a building that had, on its ground floor, a shop that mended clocks.

There was a brass plate beside the street door that named a foundation for the documentation of regional textiles. Therèse pressed a bell beside the plate, and the door released, and they went up a stair that smelled of floor-wax and, faintly, of the machine oil of the clock-shop below, and at the top of the stair a man Adaeze did not know opened a door before they reached it and held it, and said, *Madam Okonkwo,* which by now she had stopped being surprised to be called by people who had never been told her name.

It was a plain room.

It had been, once, the drawing room of an apartment; it had the high ceiling and the tall windows and the marble fireplace of one, and someone, decades ago, had put into it a long plain table and eight plain chairs and a side table with a kettle, and had hung, where a mirror would have gone, a framed and faded map of nowhere in particular, and had then stopped, as though to furnish it further would have been a kind of boast. The fireplace held no fire. The tall windows looked onto the upper branches of a plane tree just come into its full late-spring leaf, and on one of the branches, very close to the glass, a single pigeon sat with the settled look of a pigeon that considered this branch its office.

There were three people already at the table, and the man who had opened the door made a fourth, and he went to a chair set a little apart from the others, by the window, where a notebook and two pencils were laid out square, and Adaeze

understood that he was the one who would write down what was decided.

Therèse named them for her, quietly, as they took the two chairs at the foot of the table.

"Solveig," she said, of the oldest — a very old woman, eighty at least, small inside a large cardigan, white hair cut close to a fine skull, her hands at rest on the table and never quite still, with the steady tremor of great age. "Dr. Mwangi" — a spare, upright man of perhaps sixty, with reading glasses pushed up onto his forehead and the contained stillness of a person who had spent a working life telling other people things they did not want to hear. "And Mathias" — the youngest, who could not have been much past forty, with a soft, tired, clever face and a way of holding his pen in both hands as though warming them on it.

"And me," Therèse said. "I am here because there is, today, a chance the three of them divide, and if they divide they will want a fourth voice. I would rather there be no fourth voice. I would rather they not divide. But I am here in case."

"And me," Adaeze said.

"You are here to watch," Therèse said. "You will not be asked to speak. You may, afterwards, ask me anything you like. During, you watch. That is — I am sorry — that is the kindest thing I can offer you. It is also, I think, the truest."

Solveig, at the head of the table, lifted one trembling hand a small distance and let it down again, which Adaeze understood, after a moment, to have been a greeting, addressed to her, and she inclined her head in return.

"Shall we," Dr. Mwangi said.

There was, in front of each of the three, a folder. They were ordinary folders, buff card, the kind sold in any

stationer's. Adaeze had expected — she did not know what she had expected; something sealed, something with a colour to it, something that announced by its physical form that it contained a thing the world was not to have. They were buff folders. Mathias opened his and squared the pages inside it with two hands.

"For the record," said the man by the window, without looking up, his pencil ready.

"For the record," said Dr. Mwangi. "We are considering a submission referred to us under the standing arrangement, by a journal, in the ordinary way. The journal is one of forty-one that have agreed, over the last twenty years, to refer to us, before publication, any manuscript falling within certain described classes. The author does not know of the arrangement. The author believes the manuscript is under ordinary review. That belief is, as in every such case, the thing we are here to protect or to end."

"Go on," said Solveig. Her voice was small and very clear, like a voice heard down a long corridor.

"The author is a researcher," Dr. Mwangi said. "Dr. Rosario Calderón. She works at a small university, in a small city, in a part of the world that does not, ordinarily, produce work of this importance, which is one of several reasons the work is important. She has spent eleven years on it. She is fifty-one. She has, in the folder, sent a photograph, because the journal requires one, and because she is the kind of person who, asked for a photograph, sends a good one."

He turned the photograph face-up and laid it where the table could see it, and after a moment, because no one stopped her, Adaeze leaned forward and looked at it too.

It was a woman in a laboratory that was plainly not a rich laboratory, standing in front of a window with a great deal of

light behind her, so that the photograph had not quite managed her face and had got, instead, the shape of her — a sturdy woman in a white coat with her sleeves pushed up, laughing at something to the side of the camera, one hand raised halfway as though to wave the photographer off, *not yet, I am not ready,* the laugh catching her before she was ready. There was a plant on the windowsill behind her. There was a child's drawing taped to a cabinet at the edge of the frame.

Adaeze looked at it the way she looked at everything, which was as a keeper. The plant on the sill was a spider plant, the kind that survives neglect and forgives it, the kind people keep in rooms they half-live in; it had thrown out two pups and nobody had potted them on, which told her the woman was busy and meant to get to it and loved the plant anyway. The sleeves pushed up past the elbow, not folded but shoved, a worker's shove. The drawing was a house with too many windows and a sun in the corner with a face, the universal first house every child draws, and it was taped, not pinned, which meant the cabinet was metal and the tape was old and had been there through more than one summer. A woman who let a child's drawing yellow on her cabinet rather than take it down. A woman who shoved her sleeves. Adaeze had never met her and could have told you how she'd be to work beside: quick, untidy, kind, hard to interrupt. She looked away from the photograph and found that looking away did not help.

"What has she made," said Solveig.

"She has made," Dr. Mwangi said, "a method."

He did not, Adaeze noticed, reach for the language of the paper; he had plainly decided, before they came in, how he would say it, and how he would say it was in the plainest

words he had.

"She has found a way," he said, "to make a whole family of medicines — the family does not matter for our purposes; it is a large and useful family; it includes things that, at present, are made in four facilities on earth, at great expense, and shipped cold, and rationed — she has found a way to make that whole family cheaply, at small scale, without the cold, without the facilities, with equipment that a competent person could assemble in a back room from a list she provides. It works. We have had it read by people who would know. It works, it is elegant, and it is correct. If it were published tomorrow, then within five years a great many people who now die for want of these medicines, because the medicines are far away and cost too much and spoil on the road, would not die. The number is large. I am not going to say the number aloud. It is in the folder. It is large enough that I have, myself, read it three times to be sure I had not added a zero."

The room was quiet. The pigeon on the branch outside shifted its feet and resettled.

"And," said Solveig.

"And," said Dr. Mwangi, "the same method, run the other way — and it is not hidden, the other way; it is not a separate discovery; it is the same six pages read with a different intention — the same method makes, as cheaply, as simply, in the same back room, from a list as short, the other family. The one we exist to keep out of back rooms. She has not written that down. I want to be exact: she has not written the other thing down, she has not referred to it, I do not think — reading her, I do not think — she has seen it. She is a healer. She has spent eleven years looking at the one use because the one use is the use she was looking for. But it is there. It is

in what she has written the way the back of a hand is in a photograph of the front of a hand. Anyone with the intention she does not have will turn it over and see it at once."

Mathias said, quietly, without looking up from his squared pages: "She has also sent a cover letter."

"Read it," said Solveig.

"Not all of it," Mathias said. "One line." He found the line. He did not, Adaeze saw, want to read it; he read it the way a person carries a hot dish across a kitchen, quickly, because holding it longer would not help. "She writes: *I have sent this work to your journal, rather than to a more celebrated one, because yours is open, and free, and is shelved in every Repository on earth, so that the people who most need what is in these pages will not have to ask anyone's permission to find it*."

No one said anything for a moment.

"Yes," said Solveig, at last, very softly. "There it is. That is the sentence, isn't it. She has written our refusal for us, in the form of her hope. *So that they will not have to ask anyone's permission*. That is the exact property. That is the precise thing we cannot allow to be true of this, and she has named it as the reason she did it. She is a good woman. She has done a great thing. And the greatness of it and the goodness of it are the same as the danger of it; they are not in tension; they are one substance." She closed her eyes for a moment. "I am very tired of this work," she said, not as a complaint, simply as a fact she was contributing to the record, and the man by the window did not write it down, and was right not to.

"Then we proceed," Dr. Mwangi said, gently, "as we proceed."

And they did a thing then that Adaeze would think about for a long time afterward, longer than she thought about almost anything else she saw that season.

They argued for the woman.

Not against her. For her. Dr. Mwangi, who had laid out the danger so plainly, now set the danger down, as one sets down a tool one has finished with, and picked up the case for letting the work go free, and made it — made it well, made it with force, made it better than Adaeze could have made it and she had been, ten minutes ago, silently making it with her whole chest. He spoke of the number in the folder. He spoke of the road, and the cold, and the rationing, and of what rationing meant, which was that someone, somewhere, every day, decided who. He said that the Custody, by refusing, would itself become a thing that decided who — that they would be choosing the distant catastrophe that might never come over the near catastrophe that was certain and was, at this moment, happening. He said that a body which always chose the certain present harm in the name of the uncertain future harm had a name, and the name was not a good one. He said it was possible they had been doing this too long, and had mistaken the shape of their own fear for the shape of the world. He was not performing. Adaeze watched his face and he was not performing; he meant it; for the length of his speaking he believed it.

When he had finished, Solveig said: "Thank you," and meant that too.

And then Mathias — the youngest, who had read the cover letter, who had not yet argued anything — Mathias took it up, and Adaeze realized, only as he began, that this had been arranged; that there was an order to this; that the case for the woman was being built deliberately, by more

than one of them, in turn, so that it would stand at its full height in the room before anyone was permitted to do anything to it.

"I want to add only one thing to what Dr. Mwangi has said," Mathias said. He had a quiet voice; the room leaned very slightly toward it. "He has given you the argument. I want to give you the woman. She is fifty-one. She did this in a place that gave her almost nothing to do it with. She did not patent it — she could have; people far less able have grown rich on far less; she did not, and the not-doing was not an oversight, it was the whole of her intention, it is in every line of how she wrote it. She wanted it free. She is, at this moment, while we sit in this warm room with a kettle, waiting to hear from a journal. She thinks she is waiting on two referees and an editor. She checks, I would imagine, more often than she means to. She has told someone — her mother, a colleague, the child whose drawing is on her cabinet — she has told someone *I have sent it, now we wait*. And we are the wait. We are, the five of us in this room, the entire content of her waiting, and she will never know that we existed, and that is the thing I cannot —"

He stopped. He put his pen down. He picked it up again.

"That is the case," he said. "I have made it. I wanted it made by someone who believes it. I believe it."

There was a silence then that was different from the earlier silences. It had a shape to it. Adaeze became aware that she was holding the edge of the table with one hand, and made herself let go.

"Is there a case," said Solveig, "that has not been made?"

"No," said Dr. Mwangi.

"No," said Mathias.

"Then I will say the small true thing," said Solveig, "that I am here, I think, chiefly to say, because I am the oldest and have said it the most times and it has worn smooth in my mouth. We are not able to say yes. It is not that we are unwilling. It is that there is no yes here for us to say. The instrument we are — " she lifted one trembling hand and turned it over, palm up, on the table " — the instrument we are has only the one motion. We were built to be able to refuse and to be unable to permit, because the people who built us understood that a body which can permit will, in the end, permit the wrong thing, and will do it for reasons exactly as good as the reasons Dr. Mwangi has just given, which were good reasons, which were the best reasons, which are always the best reasons. The yes is not ours. The yes belongs to a world that does not need us — a world where this " — she touched the buff folder — "is only the gift it appears to be. We do not live in that world. We are the proof that we do not. So." She drew the folder a small distance toward herself. "I withhold release. One is enough. But I will not be the only one, because it is not right that I be the only one. Dr. Mwangi."

"I withhold release," said Dr. Mwangi.

"Mathias."

And Adaeze understood, in the half-second before he spoke, what the order had been for; why the case for the woman had been built so high by the others; why the youngest, who had made the most personal case, who had given them the woman herself, had been left for last.

He was the one who had to say it. That was the procedure. The one who argued hardest for mercy spoke the refusal — so that no one in the room could leave it having only argued for mercy; so that the refusal was carried out of the room in

the hands of the person who least wanted to carry it.

"I withhold release," Mathias said.

His voice did not break. It was worse than if it had broken. It was steady in the way Therèse's hand had been steady, on the postcard, after she had lifted it from the table.

"It is refused," said Solveig. "Let the record say it in the words."

The man by the window wrote — and Adaeze saw that he wrote slowly, far more slowly than the few words needed, forming each letter the way Davor had described forming letters, as though the speed at which a thing is written into a record were itself a kind of respect or its opposite, and he had decided, long ago, which. He read it back in a level voice: "The submission is considered. Release is not granted. The submission is returned to the referring journal under the standing arrangement, with no annotation, in the ordinary form." Then he laid the pencil down parallel to the edge of his notebook, squared, the way Therèse squared things, and folded his hands, and looked at none of them.

"In the ordinary form," Solveig repeated.

And that, Adaeze understood — sitting very still at the foot of the table, in the room with the cold fireplace and the pigeon at the window — that was the cruelty; not a cruelty of the kind she had been braced for, not a hand coming down, but the opposite; the careful, deliberate ensuring that nothing would come down at all. Dr. Rosario Calderón would receive, in some weeks, a message from a journal. It would be a rejection of the kind that journals send. It would be courteous. It would perhaps suggest, in the bloodless way of such messages, that the work, while of interest, was not suited to the present readership, or required revisions beyond the scope the editors could support, or some other

sentence built to be forgotten. She would read it at her desk, or on a screen in her hand, in the small city, eleven years of her life in the folder, and she would be angry, or she would be tired, or she would decide the referee had not understood, and she would, being the kind of person she was, begin to think about where to send it next; and there would be nowhere to send it next, because the forty-one journals were not all of it, and the ones that were not in the arrangement would refer it informally, out of an old habit of caution the editors themselves could not quite have explained; and slowly, over a year, over two, the work would come back and come back, and she would file it, at last, in a drawer, the best thing she had ever made, and she would never know why, and she would never know that anyone had wept over it, and someone had; Mathias had; he was not weeping now but he had, the record would not show it, and Adaeze had seen it gather and not fall.

She would think a journal had turned her down.

That was the mercy. That she would never know there was a room. That she would be allowed to keep believing she lived in the world where her gift was only a gift. The Custody would buy her that belief at the price of her life's work, and she would not be asked, and could not be asked, because to ask her would be to tell her, and to tell her would be to open the very door her own hope had described.

"That is the work," Therèse said, very quietly, beside her. "That is the ordinary Tuesday."

There was tea, afterward, in the room with the cold fireplace, because of course there was; the man who had kept the record made it, and it was not good tea, and no one said so. Solveig held her cup in both trembling hands and did not drink from it and looked at the map of nowhere on

the wall. Dr. Mwangi pulled his reading glasses down off his forehead and read, again, two pages of the folder, not because there was any further decision in them but because, Adaeze thought, he did not yet want to close it. Mathias sat with his hands flat on the table and breathed.

Adaeze did not say anything. She had been told she would not be asked to speak, and she found that she did not want to; that there was nothing in her she trusted to come out in the right shape. She sat with her own cup and let it warm her hands, and watched these four people, who had just done a terrible thing, sit in a room being unable to undo it, and she found that she could not hate them, and she found that she could not absolve them, and she understood that the not being able to do either was not a failure of her thinking but was, precisely, the thing she had been brought here to feel.

On the tram back, she said: "How do you bear it."

She had thought Therèse would say *I don't*. She had half-heard the answer in advance, the way you do; she had expected the brave, bleak, quotable thing.

Therèse did not say that.

"I don't bear it," Therèse said, looking out at the grey ceiling of the city. "Bearing it would be — bearing it would be the beginning of being able to do it lightly, and the day any of us can do it lightly is the day we have become the thing the others are afraid we are. I do not bear it. I carry it. They are different. A thing you bear, you have made your peace with; you have found the place in yourself where it fits and you have let it fit there. A thing you carry, you have not put down and you have not made fit; you have only picked it up, and you keep it in your hands, and your hands are full, always, of every one of them — the woman with the photograph, the poet I will show you one day, the others, all of them — and

that is why, you may have noticed, we are a people who are always, always making tea. It is something to do with the hands. The hands need to be doing a small kind thing or they will not believe they are still kind hands."

Adaeze looked down at her own hands, around the cold remainder of the tea she had carried out of the room without meaning to.

She set the cup on her knee. And then, without deciding to, in the way the gesture came to her now whenever the rest of her did not know what to do, she did the latch: the first two fingers of her right hand to the side of the cup, lightly, the way she touched the gate-post; top, bottom, two fingers; the ritual that kept the gate from forgetting it was a gate.

Therèse watched her do it and did not ask.

She had a gate, Adaeze thought. She had spent her whole life keeping one thing in and keeping one thing out and telling herself the two were the same act, which they were. She had thought, until this season, that the keeping was a kindness she did to the otters. She had not understood, until a room with a cold fireplace and a pigeon at the window, that somewhere a person stood on the wrong side of every gate that was ever kept, and that the keeper did not get to choose to keep the gate and also to be loved by the one it shut out; that you kept it, or you did not; that Mama Nneka had signed the no first, and then had signed the yes, and had spent the rest of her life, Adaeze now saw, carrying both pages in her hands and making, one imagined, a very great deal of tea.

The tram crossed a bridge. Below it a canal went on being a canal.

"All right," Adaeze said, which was not agreement, and was not absolution, and Therèse, who knew the difference,

said nothing at all, and let her have it.

Chapter Ten

Iyanna's Letter

The letter came on the fourth morning, in the rain.

Eva brought it up to the attic herself, which Adaeze understood, later, to have been a kindness with a procedure folded inside it; Eva did not, as a rule, climb the stair. She knocked, and waited to be told to come in, and came in with two cups of tea balanced in the careful way of a person who has decided to have her hands full so that the rest of her has something to do, and she set one cup on the writing-table and kept the other, and she had, under her arm, an envelope.

"This came," she said. "For you. To the address in Lagos — the one the household arrangement left with your sister. It came up to us in the ordinary post. It has been four days getting here. I am sorry it is slow. The slowness is real; it is not us holding it. It left her hand four days ago."

"All right," Adaeze said.

She did not, yet, take it.

"I am going to tell you a thing," Eva said, "that you did not ask me to tell you, because I would rather you had it than not. The envelope came to us before it came to you. It was looked at. Not read — looked at. We have to. The channel your sister used is a channel that someone else, if they were clever, and they are clever, could also use, to send a thing to you that was not a letter, or to send a letter that was a way of finding out where you are. So it was looked at — held to the light, weighed, the seal checked — by Lukasz, who does this,

and who is good at it, and who did not read it. The pages were not taken out. I am telling you both halves — that it was handled, and that it was not read — so that you have them both. You will have to decide whether to believe the second part. I cannot give you an instrument that proves it. There is no such instrument. There is only the fact that I am the kind of person who would rather tell you than not, and you will have to weigh that, which is, I am aware, a poor sort of proof. It is the only sort we have. It is the only sort, in the end, that anyone has."

"I believe you," Adaeze said, and found, as she said it, that she did, and found, a half-second later, the small cold place underneath the believing where she would never, now, be entirely sure — and understood that the small cold place was the price, and that Eva had handed it to her openly rather than let her find it on her own in the dark, which was, she was beginning to learn, the whole of how these people did the unforgivable: in the light, with the cost named, so that you could not say afterward that you had not been told.

"I will leave you with it," Eva said, and set the second cup down too, both cups now, for the company of them, and went out, and closed the door without a sound.

The envelope was a plain brown envelope of the kind sold in strips at a counter, and the hand on the front of it was Iyanna's.

Adaeze had not seen Iyanna's handwriting in some time — they were not, the two of them, letter-writers; they were sharp-phone-call people, they were come-to-the-house people — and the sight of it did a thing to her chest that the four days and the rain and the looked-at-not-read had not done. It was upright where Mama Nneka's had leaned; it was firm, pressed hard into the paper, written with a biro that

had skipped twice and been shaken and gone on; it underlined. Iyanna underlined the way she said things aloud, twice, when she meant them, and there were, Adaeze could see through the back of the top page held to the grey light of the window, several underlinings.

She sat on the edge of the bed. She did not touch the tea.

She got a thumb under the flap and opened it, and the envelope let out, faint and immediate and gone before she could be sure of it, the smell of the back office at the sanctuary — or of the mother's house, she could not tell which, they shared a smell, the smell of a damp climate working patiently on cheap paper and old wood, of a place where the air had salt in it. Six thousand kilometres and four days and it had carried that much. She held the open envelope to her face for a moment, in the attic, in the dry northern morning, and breathed it, and felt foolish, and did it again.

Then she opened it.

*

Adaeze —

So. A woman came to the door. Dressed the way you described your tram-woman on the phone, which is to say dressed as the idea of a person rather than as a person, in a coat that did not believe in weather. She said she was from the programme and that there was an arrangement for the household while you are away. She gave me an envelope. There was money in it. For the cat. For the rosemary. A reasonable amount, and then somewhat more than reasonable, and the somewhat-more is how I knew it was not from the sanctuary, because the sanctuary has never

once in its life paid even the reasonable amount for anything.

I fed the cat. I did not spend the money. It is in the drawer with the spare keys. When you are home you can tell me what it is, or not tell me, and either way the cat is fed and the money is in the drawer.

The roof is started. You remember Tunde from church, the one with the laugh that comes up out of him like water out of a pump — his nephew does roofs now, and does them properly, and does not look at me while he says the number as though the number is a favour he is doing me. Four days, he thinks. I am keeping the receipts. You know about the receipts.

I went by the sanctuary on Sunday because Eze asked me to look at a rota, which means I am now your secretary, for which I also am getting nothing. The otters are otters. Professor is fat and rude and alive and sends, I am instructed to say, his regards, which he does not. The new one still has no name; the children have formed factions. Eze says the filtration girl came back with her entire class, so you are now, against your will and your wishes, an educator.

I have been in Mama's room. Don't make the face. Someone had to, and it has been twelve years, and the damp came through that wall before the nephew got to it and I had to lift things down off the wardrobe to save them. I found her box — the cedar one, the cards, the people we did not know. I sat on the floor in the dust like an old woman and read some of them, the way we said we would, that week, and then never did. I cried a little, which I will deny. Most of them are nothing. Birthday things. A woman called Felicity who wrote like a queen visiting a colony. I

am going to go through the whole box properly when the roof is done and keep Mama's own letters and the family ones and let the rest go — half of these people are dead and the other half we never met and it is only paper, Adaeze, she would have done the same to ours without blinking. I'll do it before you are back so you don't have to.

Come home when the training lets you. I am not asking what it is. I have decided not to ask, which you should know is much harder than asking, and which I am, as established, getting nothing for. But I will say one thing and then leave it, and the one thing is this: you came back from your tram with a face I have seen on you exactly once before, which was the week Mama died, and that is the only thing about any of this that frightens me. Not where you are. Not the woman in the coat. The face. So. Wherever you are, whatever it is — eat. Sleep. And if you can come home, come home.

The house is here. The chair is here. I am here.

— Iyanna

(The cat is fine. The cat does not miss you. I am telling you so that you will not ask.)

*

Adaeze read it once quickly, the way one reads a letter from home, greedily, for the voice; and then she read it again slowly, the way one reads a letter from home the second time, for the person; and then she read it a third time, and the third time she read it the way she had been taught, this season, to read — the way Eva read a preprint, the way the room above the clock-shop had read a cover letter — for the line in it that was not what it appeared to be.

She found it on the third reading. She had known, on the first, where it would be.

A woman called Felicity who wrote like a queen visiting a colony.

The tea went cold on the table beside her. The rain went on against the attic window, the small thoughtful rain, the kind that had decided to be a presence and not a problem.

Felicity.

She made herself be exact, the way Dr. Mwangi had made himself be exact. She did not, she told herself, *know* that the Felicity in the box was Felicity-of-the-four. Felicity was a name; people were named it; it was the kind of name a certain generation of a certain kind of family gave a certain kind of daughter, the saints' names, the names you did not so much give a child as lay upon her like a small heavy coat she would grow into — Felicity, Perpetua, Cyprian, Hippolytus —

— and there it stopped being possible to pretend, because those four names did not occur together in the world by accident; they occurred together in exactly one place, which was the foot of a wardrobe in a house by a lagoon, in a cedar box that smelled of the cedar Mama Nneka had put in it forty years ago against the insects; and Adaeze had, in a Brussels office four days ago and a lifetime ago, said all four of them aloud with her eyes closed, and a woman named Eva had said *your grandmother was Perpetua,* and the whole grey morning had gone still around it.

The box was real. The box was in the house. The box had, in it, the letters the four of them had written each other across forty years — not the official architecture, not the recipe, nothing that was kept beneath the floor of the city of pale stone; but the letters; the *hands*; the private

back-and-forth of the four people who had built the thing; the birthday things, the queenly Felicity, the names, the mark, the shape of how they had talked to one another when they thought no one who mattered was reading.

And the re-derivers had used the names. The re-derivers had used the mark. *They do not have it from us,* Lukasz had said of the kettle, in another matter, in another week; *they have it from him, or they have him*. Where did a person get the names and the mark of four people who had signed nothing in public, who had been, in their own families, believed to have worked for the Council the way one works for the railway? You got them from the inside, or you got them from a box.

And Iyanna was going to go through the box properly when the roof was done, and keep Mama's own and the family ones, and let the rest go, because it was only paper.

Adaeze sat very still on the edge of the made bed in the attic in Brussels with her sister's letter in her two hands and understood, with the particular completeness of a thing one has been walking toward for days without looking at it, that she was now holding a piece of information, and that the information was dangerous, and that there were, in all the world, exactly two parties to whom she might give it, and that she could not give it to either.

She could not tell Iyanna.

To tell Iyanna *do not touch the box, do not read another card, do not let it out of the house, do not let anyone know it exists* was to tell Iyanna everything; was to put into Iyanna the same furniture that had been put into her; was to do to her sister, across six thousand kilometres and a brown envelope, the precise thing that had been done to her in a room three floors under a library. And even the partial

telling — even the strangled, explanationless *Yanna, please, just leave the box alone, I can't say why* — would not work, because Iyanna was not a person you could say *leave it alone, I can't say why* to; Iyanna was a person who, told that, would hear the wrongness in it the way she had heard the wrongness in *training,* and would go straight to the box and open every letter in it looking for the thing her sister was afraid of, because that was who she was, that was the whole of who she was, she went toward the avoided thing, it was the best of her and it would, this once, be the worst.

And she could not tell the Custody.

This was the part that sat down in her chest and would not get up. She could not tell the Custody, and the reason she could not tell the Custody was that she had spent the previous morning in a room above a clock-shop watching what the Custody did with a person who became a matter.

They did it kindly. That was the thing. They did it with the best reasons, the best people, the photograph laid face-up on the table, the case for the woman argued at its full height by people who wept and did not let it fall. And at the end of it the woman was a buff folder, and a refusal in the ordinary form, and a life's work in a drawer, and she would never know, and the never-knowing was the mercy.

If Adaeze went downstairs now, and carried this letter to Therèse, and said *the box is real and it is in my mother's house and my sister is about to sort it* — then within a day, within hours, there would be a buff folder. Not a cruel one. A kind one. A careful, sorrowful, entirely defensible one, opened by good people who would argue for Iyanna at her full height before they did the necessary thing. There would be a woman in a coat that did not believe in weather, at the door of the house by the lagoon, with an arrangement. There

would be the box, taken — gently, with a receipt, *we do not as a rule keep what was not given to us,* but taken. There would be Iyanna, who had decided not to ask, made into a person about whom decisions were quietly taken. There would be, around her sister, for the rest of her sister's life, the soft permanent weather of being known about.

And Iyanna would never be told why. Because to tell her why would be to open the door. So Iyanna would become a woman who had once, in the year her sister went strange, had a box of her grandmother's old letters taken away by polite people, and had never understood it, and had filed it, like the researcher would file her drawer, under the heading of things that had happened to her that she would never be given the shape of.

That was the mercy that was on offer. That was the kindest version. Adaeze had seen the kindest version. She had watched it done by the gentlest hands in the world, and she could not, she found — sitting on the bed, the letter going soft at the folds from her holding — she could not be the one who walked downstairs and started it.

So she would carry it.

She understood that this was the wrong choice. She was almost sure it was the wrong choice. The box was a danger — to the work, to the dome, to the child in the yellow raincoat and every child like her — and the right thing, the thing Mama Nneka would perhaps have done, the thing the woman she was becoming was supposed to do, was to go downstairs and put the danger into the hands of the people whose whole sad life was the careful handling of danger. She knew that. She held it next to the other thing, the two of them in her two hands like the corners of two pages on a desk with the breeze going across it, and the two things

would not, this time, settle.

She did not go downstairs.

She sat in the attic until the tea was wholly cold and the rain had thinned and the light had moved across the rooftops the short distance it moved in an hour, and then she got up, and she did the only thing that was both true and possible, which was: she answered the letter.

She found, in the drawer of the writing-table, the paper the spoke kept there for guests, and a pen, and she sat down and wrote to her sister.

She wrote that she was well. (True.) She wrote that she was eating, more or less, and sleeping, less than more, and that there was a great deal of tea where she was, more tea than any reasonable person required. (True.) She wrote that the woman in the coat was, in fact, a decent person, and that the money was real and that Iyanna should, if she would not spend it on herself, spend it on the roof, and keep that receipt too. (True.) She wrote that Professor was not to be encouraged in his rudeness and that the new otter should be called Yusuf, full stop, and that Eze should be told that Adaeze had ruled on the matter from abroad and the ruling was final. (True, and the first thing in the letter that made her, alone in the attic, do the small broken sound that is half a laugh.)

She wrote that she would come home as soon as she could. (True. She did not know when. That was also true, and she did not write it.)

And then she came to the box, and she sat with the pen above the paper for a long time.

She could not warn her. She had been over it and she could not. But she found that she could, perhaps, do a smaller thing, a thing that was not a warning and was not a

lie, a thing that was only a sister asking a sister for something, which sisters were allowed to do without giving reasons, which was the one currency she still had that did not have to be paid for in the truth.

Don't do the box without me, she wrote.

I know you said you'd do it so I wouldn't have to. Don't. Not because of anything — don't make the face — only because she was mine too, and I have been a ten-minutes-a-year granddaughter, you said so yourself and you were right, and the box is the one part of going through her things that I think I could actually do, the reading part, the her part. Leave it on the wardrobe. Leave it exactly where it is. We'll sit on the floor in the dust together like two old women and read every single one, Felicity and all, and you can deny crying and I will deny crying, and then we'll decide together what to keep. That's all. Leave the box for me. Promise me the box.

She read it back.

It was not a warning. It would not, she thought, frighten Iyanna; it would, if anything, please her, because it was the closest thing to *come home and grieve with me* that Adaeze had ever put on a page, and Iyanna had been waiting nine years for some version of that sentence. And it would keep the box on the wardrobe, unsorted, unread, un-let-go, for as long as it took — because Iyanna kept her promises, and kept the ones she extracted even more fiercely than the ones she gave, and would now guard that box not as a danger, which she did not know it was, but as a thing she and her sister were finally, finally going to do together.

It was the best she could do. It was a small dishonesty wrapped around a large truth, which she was beginning to understand was the only kind of honesty the rest of her life

was going to permit her. It bought time. It did not solve anything. It left the most dangerous box in the world sitting on top of a wardrobe in a house by a lagoon, guarded by a promise, and it left Adaeze the only person alive who knew that this was what it was.

She folded the letter. She did the latch on the fold — top, bottom, two fingers — before she could stop her hands, and then sat looking at her own hands as if they belonged to someone she was only just being introduced to.

Downstairs, faintly, she could hear them: Lukasz saying something dry, André laughing the short laugh he had, the domestic clink of the kettle being filled. The ordinary Tuesday sounds of the gentlest people in the world, three floors down, who would have helped her, who would have been kind, who would have made it a buff folder.

She put her sister's letter inside her cardigan, against the place where the other folded paper already was, so that there were now two of them over her heart, the grandmother's and the sister's, and she went and stood at the window and looked out at the wet rooftops of a city that was not hers, in a country that was not hers, holding a secret that was not the Custody's and was not Iyanna's and was, now, only and entirely her own.

She did not, that day, go down for a long time.

When she did, she carried her two cold cups of tea down with her, because the hands needed to be doing a small thing, and she rinsed them at the basin in the back kitchen, and she did not tell anyone anything, and Therèse, who had come in wet from somewhere and was hanging the grey coat on its peg, looked at her once, the long look, the look that missed nothing, and saw — Adaeze was certain she saw — that there was now a thing; and said nothing; and let her

have it; and put the kettle on.

Chapter Eleven

First Contact

She went back to the branch on her own, on the sixth day, in the afternoon, and she did not tell anyone she was going.

This was, she knew, the second small thing. The first had been the box; the first had been carrying the box; and the box had taught her, in the four days since, something she had not known about secrets, which was that they were not events but appetites — that once you were keeping one, the keeping of it made a place in you that wanted to keep more, the way the first lie in an afternoon makes the second one easier and the third one nearly free. She had a secret now, from the gentlest people in the world, three floors down, who would have helped her. And so when, after lunch, the rain having lifted to a high bright Brussels overcast, she had found that she wanted to walk — only to walk, only to be a woman walking in a city, with no one at her left elbow at a polite half-pace — she had not gone down to the room with the three desks to say so. She had taken her cardigan off its hook and gone out the front door and along the canal, and no one had stopped her, because she was not, she reminded herself, a prisoner. She was a guest. The Custody did not keep people. It was rather the point of them.

She told herself this the whole way to the branch, which was how she knew she did not entirely believe it.

The square in front of the half-dome had its market. The peonies-woman was at her bucket, reading; the peonies had

gone over and been replaced by something white and loose that Adaeze did not know the name of; the cheese-stalls were doing the steady unremarkable business of a Tuesday that was, by now, a Thursday. She crossed the square and went in by the long door that faced it, the way she had gone in with Therèse, and the warm tile took her sandals, and the high indirect light came down, and it was, as it had been, quiet in the way that contained a great deal of small sound.

She went toward the corner.

She did not, she told herself, have a reason. She wanted to see whether the child in the yellow raincoat was there, which the child was not, of course, because it was a different day and a different hour and children were not fixed stars; she wanted to sit, perhaps, for a while, in the place where the thing had happened to her, the realization she had not wanted and had not been able to put down, and see whether sitting there again made it lighter or heavier or only the same. She wanted — she was honest with herself about this much, at least, as she reached the last row of stacks — she wanted to be, for an hour, in the one place she had been in this whole strange season that was not the Custody and was not a tram and was not a room with a folder in it; the one place that was only itself; the dome that was true.

There was a woman at the long table by the children's corner.

She was young — younger than Adaeze by ten years, perhaps more; in her middle twenties — and she was sitting with a book open in front of her and another three stacked at her elbow and a notebook beside the stack, and she was not, when Adaeze came around the stacks, reading any of them. She was watching the children's corner, where a small boy was attempting to reshelve a book very much too large for

him on a shelf very much too high, with the patient, slightly amused attention of a person who had decided not to help him because the helping would be the end of something he was enjoying.

She had a long, calm, clever face. She had her hair covered in a soft dark scarf, and a cardigan of her own, grey, and the kind of stillness Adaeze had learned, this season, to recognize — except that on Therèse the stillness was procedural, was a thing held, and on this woman it was not held; it was simply where she lived.

There were two cups of tea on the table.

One in front of her. One in front of the empty chair across from her.

Adaeze stopped.

She understood several things in the space of one breath, in the wrong order, the way one understands the floor is not where one's foot expected it. She understood that the second cup of tea was for her. She understood that the woman had known she would come — not today, perhaps, but some day; had been coming to this branch, perhaps, every afternoon, with two cups of tea, waiting for the day Adaeze came back on her own, because Adaeze coming back on her own was the only condition under which this could happen at all. She understood that she should turn around. She understood, a half-second after understanding she should turn around, that she was not going to.

The woman looked up.

"Hello," she said. Her English had an accent Adaeze could not place and did not try to; it had the evenness of a language learned early and loved. "I made you tea. It will be cold by now. I have made you tea four afternoons and it has been cold four times. I am not a good estimator of when a

person will do the brave thing. Will you sit?"

"Who are you," Adaeze said.

"My name is Hadiya," the woman said. "Sit, please. If you would rather I did the talking, I will do the talking, and you may leave whenever you like; you are not — I want to say this first, because I know what you have been taught to think of us — you are not in any difficulty. There is no one else here. It is only me. I came alone. They did not want me to come at all."

Adaeze did not sit.

"You are one of them," she said.

"I am one of us," Hadiya said, gently, without heat, as one corrects a small persistent error in a person one has decided to be patient with. "Yes. I am one of the people who are doing the thing your Custody is afraid of. I would rather you sat, because if you stand and I sit I will have to look up at you, and it will feel to both of us like an interrogation, and it is not one. But I am not going to ask you twice. I have learned that asking twice is a kind of pushing, and we do not — whatever you have been told — we do not push."

Adaeze sat.

She did not know, afterward, entirely why; or rather she knew exactly why, and did not like the why, which was that she had wanted to, which was that some part of her had been wanting, for six days, for one full day, for a season, to sit across a table from the other half of the question and hear it say its own sentences in its own voice instead of hearing them only in her own head at three in the morning. She sat. She did not touch the tea.

"How did you find me," she said.

"That is the question you have been told to ask," Hadiya said, "and it is a fair one, and I will answer it as well as I am

able, which is: not the way you fear. We did not follow you from Lagos. We did not put a thing in your sister's letter. We are not — we do not have the reach you have been encouraged to imagine; we are not a mirror of them; we are perhaps thirty people, and most of us are tired, and one of us is very good with what can be known from public sources, and a keeper of a small coastal sanctuary who stops appearing at her sanctuary, whose sister tells the church she is away on a northern training, whose name is the name of a line we already had reason to be interested in — that is not, I am sorry to say, very hidden. You were not betrayed. You were only read. It is a thing I am good at, the reading. It is most of what I do."

"The name of a line you already had reason to be interested in," Adaeze repeated.

"Yes."

"Say what you mean."

Hadiya looked at her for a moment. The small boy in the corner had got his enormous book onto a low shelf at last, sideways, wrong, triumphant, and had gone away pleased, and the book sat there crooked, and neither of them moved to fix it.

"I mean your grandmother," Hadiya said.

And then she did the thing that Adaeze would carry out of that room and keep, alongside the box and the letter, over her heart for the rest of the season: she reached into the stack of books at her elbow, and from between two of them she took a single sheet — not an old sheet, a photocopy, a clean modern photocopy of something older — and she set it on the table, and she turned it so that it faced Adaeze, and she did not slide it across, but left it in the middle, on the neutral ground, where Adaeze would have to choose to reach

for it.

It was a letter. It was in a hand Adaeze knew. It was tilted slightly to the right, in the particular rapid set of someone who had taught herself to write on a desk that wobbled.

"We have some of her letters," Hadiya said, quietly. "Not many. Not from a box in a house — I want to be clear, so that you are not frightened for something you should not be frightened for, today: these did not come from your family. These came to us by another road, a road I will tell you about if you ever want to know it, which is not today. But we have them. I have read them. I have read your grandmother more closely, I think, than almost anyone alive except, now, you. And I will tell you what I found, because I think you have a right to it that is older than the Custody's right to keep it from you, and because I think — I may be wrong — that you have already begun to suspect it."

Adaeze did not reach for the letter.

She read it anyway, from where it lay, upside down to Hadiya and right way up to her, the way you cannot not read a thing in a hand you have loved. It was not long. It was a fragment, the middle of something, no greeting, no signature, only the body of a paragraph her grandmother had written to someone forty years ago, and it said:

— and so I have come to think that the worst thing we are building is not the lock. The lock I can defend; the lock keeps the knife out of the child's hand. The worst thing we are building is the silence around the lock. We are building a world that will be good, genuinely good, better than any that has been, and that will be good in part because a small number of people agreed to carry a thing the rest may not know they carry. And I cannot stop asking: what do we owe them, the ones who will not know? We will have

decided, on their behalf, that there is a door they may not open and may not see and may not vote upon. We will have decided it for their children and their children's children. We will have been right to. And being right to will not discharge the debt. There is a debt. I do not know to whom it is owed or how it could ever be paid. I only know that we are the ones incurring it, and that we are incurring it in the dark, and that the dark is the part I cannot —

It stopped there. The photocopy ended mid-sentence, at the foot of a page, the next page not given, or not had.

Adaeze sat very still.

"That is the part you have begun to suspect," Hadiya said, not unkindly. "Isn't it. That is the thing they cannot say to you, down in their rooms, over their tea, with their good faces — because to say it would be to admit that the question is real, and that they have answered it not by paying the debt but by hiding it; by making sure the people who are owed never learn that they are owed anything; by deciding that the kindest thing they can do for the ones in the dark is to keep them in the dark so completely that they never feel its edges. Your grandmother felt the edges. She wrote it down. She wrote it down and then she helped build the silence anyway, and I do not — I want you to hear this — I do not despise her for it. I think she was braver than the ones who never wrote it down. But she knew. She is telling you, across forty years, that she knew."

"You read me my grandmother," Adaeze said, "to recruit me."

"Yes," Hadiya said. "I am not going to insult you by pretending I did not. I read you your grandmother because it is the truest thing I have and because I think the truth is the only thing that should be allowed to move a person on a

question this size. They moved you with a tram and a kettle and a child reading a book. I am moving you with your grandmother's own doubt. We are both doing the same thing. I am only — I would say — being more honest with you about doing it. That is the whole of my advantage and I am using it. I have very little else."

The honesty of it was the worst thing. Adaeze felt it go in. She had been braced — she realized, sitting there — for a fanatic, for a cold clever person with a grievance, for someone she could dislike and so dismiss; she had been braced for the cartoon, because the cartoon would have let her keep her balance. And instead here was a tired young woman with a kind face and a soft scarf and two cups of cold tea, who had read her grandmother more closely than she had, who was not lying to her, who had said *I am moving you with your grandmother's own doubt and I am telling you that is what I am doing*. You could not push against that. There was nothing to push against. It gave way like water and was, like water, not weak.

"Tell me what you want," Adaeze said. "Not the speech. The thing. What do you actually want to do."

"I want to make the door knowable," Hadiya said.

"You want to open it."

"No." For the first time something firmed in her voice, a hardness under the gentleness, the bedrock the gentleness was laid over. "No. Listen, because this is the part they will have told you wrong, and they will have told you wrong because it is easier to be afraid of us if you think it. We do not want to open the door. I have no wish — none of us, the ones who are serious, have any wish — to put the knife in the child's hand. The lock keeps a real knife from a real child; your grandmother was right; on that, she and I do not

disagree by one degree. I do not want what is behind the door to be in the world. I want the *door* to be in the world. I want it known that it is there. I want it argued about, in daylight, by everyone, the way everything else that governs us is argued about — badly, and slowly, and with people shouting, and with votes that go the wrong way half the time, which is what it looks like when something belongs to everyone instead of to four old people and their careful grey inheritors. I want the people in the dark to be told there is a dark. That is all. That is the entire crime. We are not trying to unlock the door. We are trying to turn on the light in the hallway, so that the people who live in the house can at least see that there is a door they are not allowed to open, and decide, as a house, whether they consent to that, instead of having had it decided for them by people who made very sure they would never find out there was anything to consent to."

"And if they decide wrong," Adaeze said. "If the house, in daylight, shouting, votes to open it."

Hadiya was quiet for a moment.

"Then we will have a terrible problem," she said, "that belongs to all of us, instead of a tolerable problem that belongs to a few of us and is paid for by everyone in a coin they are not allowed to see. I do not know that daylight is safe. I am not a fool; please do not let them tell you I am a fool. I know exactly what I am risking. I have lain awake. I have done the thing you are doing right now, the holding of the two things in the two hands. I have held them for three years. And I have come down on the side of daylight, and I will tell you why, and then I will stop, because I have talked too much, and the tea is cold, and you should go before you are missed.

"I came down on the side of daylight because I do not believe a good thing can be kept good by a lie forever. I think the lie is a slow poison and that they have not felt it yet because forty years is not long, and that in two hundred years the people keeping the door will not be Therèse, will not be your Solveig who is tired and weeps over folders — I know their names; do not look surprised; the reading is most of what I do — in two hundred years the people keeping the door will be whoever the keeping has shaped, and the keeping shapes you, it cannot not, and a body that exists to refuse and to never explain and to never be seen will, in the end, in two hundred years, be a thing your grandmother would not have signed her *no* in front of. The yes they cannot say — they are so proud of that, the only-ever-no — the yes will come anyway, not as a yes, as a drift, as the slow becoming of the thing they swore they were not. And no one will see it, because they made very sure no one is allowed to watch. I want people to be allowed to watch. That is the whole of it. You may tell them I said so. I would like it, in fact, if you told them I said so."

She stopped.

She picked up her own cold tea and drank from it, the whole of it, the way a person drinks who has said the thing they came to say and is now only a person at a table again, and she set the cup down, and she gathered her books, the three from the stack and the one she had been not-reading, and she put the small notebook on top, and she left the photocopy of the letter where it lay.

"That is yours," she said, of the letter. "It was always yours. They will not have shown it to you; it is not in the folio; the folio is the architecture and the failsafe, it is not her doubts, they did not keep her doubts, the doubts were not

dangerous enough to keep. But I think the doubts are the most important thing she made, and I think you should have them, and I think they are more truly an inheritance than the thing they keyed to your blood. So. It is yours. Do with it what you like. Show it to them. I don't mind. There is nothing in it they do not already know and have already decided does not matter."

She stood.

"Will I see you again," Adaeze said, and was appalled to hear, in her own voice, that she wanted the answer to be yes; that some traitor part of her, the part that had walked here alone, had liked this; had liked being talked to as a person who could decide things rather than as a person things were being decided about; had liked, God help her, the honesty, which the gentlest people in the world had not, quite, given her, because the gentlest people in the world had a door to protect and honesty all the way down was a luxury they could not afford and Hadiya, having nothing to protect but an argument, could.

"I don't know," Hadiya said. "That is not me being mysterious. I genuinely don't know. It depends on you, and on them, and on a season that is moving faster than any of us. But I will tell you a thing, Adaeze — may I call you Adaeze; I feel I know you; I have read your grandmother — I will tell you a thing, for nothing, because you did the brave thing and sat down. They are going to ask you to use it. The failsafe. You know this. They have brought you all this way and they have been so gentle and so honest about everything except the one thing, which is that there is a knife in the room after all, and it is you, and they are going to ask you to use the knife on the very thing my friends have spent three years building, and they are going to be so sorrowful about

asking, and they are going to mean the sorrow, and the sorrow is going to be the thing that makes it almost impossible for you to say no.

"I am only asking you to remember, when they ask, that your grandmother said no first. She told you herself, didn't she. Somewhere. They will have let you have that, because it makes her noble. But they will not have told you the other half, which is in here" — she touched, lightly, the photocopied letter on the table — "which is that she went to her grave not knowing whether the no or the yes had been the right one. She did not know. She is the wisest person either of us will ever be related to or read, and she did not know. So when they tell you that using it is what she would have wanted — and they will — you will at least know that they are telling you something she herself was never sure of. That is all. That is my whole gift to you. Knowing that no one knows. It is not much. It is, I have found, everything."

She settled her books in the crook of her arm.

"The fig bun, two streets over, is genuinely as good as she told you," Hadiya said, with the first thing that was almost a smile. "She was right about that. She is right about a great many things. That is what makes her so hard to leave. Goodbye, Adaeze. Thank you for the bravery. Drink the tea, even cold; it is good tea; I am not a monster; I would not give you bad tea."

And she went — not quickly, not furtively, only a young woman leaving a library with her books, nodding to the crooked giant book the small boy had shelved wrong as though she approved of it, out the long door into the square, into the loose white flowers and the cheese-stalls and the high bright overcast, gone.

Adaeze sat at the table for a long time.

The two cups of cold tea sat in front of her, hers untouched, Hadiya's empty. The photocopy of her grandmother's doubt lay on the neutral ground in the middle of the table where it had been left, hers now, an inheritance more true, the woman had said, than the one they keyed to her blood.

She did the only thing she knew how to do when the rest of her did not know what to do. She reached out and she touched the edge of the letter, two fingers, lightly, the way she touched the gate-post; and she did not take it up, not yet; she only held her fingers against it, top, bottom, two fingers, the ritual that kept the gate from forgetting it was a gate; except that she did not any longer know, sitting there, which side of the gate she was on, or which side of it her grandmother had been on, or whether the gate, in the end, was a thing you stood beside and kept, or a thing that had been built straight through the middle of a person, with half of her on each side, for forty years, until she died.

After a while she took the letter up. She folded it once. She put it inside her cardigan, against the place where the other two papers were, so that there were three of them now over her heart: the grandmother's note that said *read it only if your hand has already agreed;* the sister's letter that said *the house is here, the chair is here, I am here;* and now this, the grandmother again, younger, in the middle of a sentence she never finished, saying *there is a debt, and I do not know to whom it is owed.*

She drank the cold tea. It was, as promised, good.

On her way out she passed the low shelf where the boy had jammed his enormous book in sideways and wrong. She stopped at it. Her hands wanted to fix it — they always wanted to fix something left wrong, it was the oldest reflex

she had, straighten the bucket, true the gate, set the latch — and she stood over the crooked book with her hands half-raised and found that she did not know, any longer, whether fixing it would be a kindness to the next reader or a theft from the boy, who had shelved it himself, badly, in triumph, and might come back tomorrow to find it and be proud. She left it as he had left it. She did not entirely know why. It was the first decision she had made all day that felt like hers, and it was about a book on a low shelf, and she could not have defended it to anyone.

Then she walked back along the canal to the spoke, and the whole way she rehearsed how she would tell them — *a woman found me, she is one of them, she knew my name, she knew your names, she has some of Mama Nneka's letters, you need to know this* — because telling them was right; telling them was obviously, flatly right; the contact was a breach, the letters were a thread they could pull, Hadiya herself had said *you may tell them I said so,* had practically asked to be reported, and a person of good faith, a person who was on the side of the dome and the child in the raincoat, would walk in and say all of it before the kettle had boiled.

She got to the spoke. She let herself in. The hallway smelled of the day's tea. André was on the phone; Eva was at the laptop; Lukasz was at his docket; Therèse, who must have come in while Adaeze was out, was in the chair that complained, with a cup in her two hands, and she looked up, and she saw Adaeze's face, the long look, the look that missed nothing.

"You walked," Therèse said. "Good. You should. Did you go far?"

And Adaeze stood in the doorway with three papers over her heart and the taste of cold good tea in her mouth, and she opened her mouth to say the right thing, the flatly right thing, and what came out instead, in a voice that was steady in a way she did not feel, was:

"Just to the branch. To see if the child was there. She wasn't."

"No," Therèse said gently. "They never are, the same one twice. That is rather the loveliest thing about the place." She lifted her cup a little. "There is tea. André's. It is good today."

"Thank you," Adaeze said, and went to pour herself a cup she did not want, so that her hands would have a small thing to do, and so that her back would be to the room, and so that no one would have to see her face do the thing it was doing, which was the thing it had done, Iyanna had written, exactly once before; the week their grandmother died; the only thing about any of this that frightened the one person left alive who loved Adaeze without first needing anything from her.

She had kept the second secret.

It had been even easier than the first.

Chapter Twelve

The Otters

The news came on a Friday, the way the worst small news always seems to come, at the slack end of a week, when the body has already begun to loosen toward a rest it has not yet been given.

Eva took the call. The spoke had a telephone, an actual telephone, a beige thing on the wall by the back kitchen that rang perhaps twice a week and was answered, always, by whoever was nearest, in the manner of a household rather than an office. Adaeze was nearest. But Eva, crossing the hall with a stack of folders, got to it half a step ahead, and said the spoke's careful non-name into it — *yes, hello* — and listened, and then turned, with the receiver against her shoulder, and looked at Adaeze with a particular softness that Adaeze understood, before a word was said, to be bad news wearing its gentlest coat.

"It is your sister," Eva said. "She is well. Everyone is well. It is — she says it is not an emergency, she says to tell you first that it is not an emergency, before she says the rest." Eva held the receiver out. "She wanted you to hear it from her."

Adaeze took the phone.

The cord was long enough that she could stand in the doorway of the back kitchen, half in and half out, with the window over the basin showing her a square of Brussels sky going pewter toward evening. She put the receiver to her ear

and there, six thousand kilometres away, down a line that hummed very faintly with all the distance it was crossing, was Iyanna; and Adaeze knew, from the single syllable of her sister saying her name, what it was, because there were only so many things it could be, and Iyanna had already ruled out the ones that ended a person.

"It's Professor," Iyanna said.

"Yes," Adaeze said.

"This morning. Eze found him this morning. He had — Adaeze, he had not been sick, you must not think we missed something, the vet had seen him on Tuesday and said he was an old otter being an old otter. He was on his rock. Eze said he was on his rock, in the morning sun, in the place he liked, and he had — he was just gone. In the night. Eze said there was no — he said it looked like nothing. He said it looked like sleeping. He wanted me to tell you that. He said, *tell her it looked like nothing, tell her he was on the rock*."

Adaeze stood in the doorway with the pewter square of sky in front of her.

"How old was he," she said, which was a strange thing to say, and was the only thing she could find, because the true things were too large to get through the small opening that was all she could manage to keep open in herself, and the age of an otter was a fact, and a fact would go through.

"You would know better than me," Iyanna said. "Old. Eze said old. Eze said — he said you'd had him eleven years and he was not young when he came."

"Twelve," Adaeze said. "Eleven years and — he came in the spring. So twelve."

"Twelve, then."

"He was not — " Adaeze stopped. "He didn't like to be rushed," she said. "Even his fish. He took a second one,

always, like a — I used to say like a country requiring its anthem. He'd make you wait. He'd come down off the rock like he was doing you a favour to be hungry." She was aware that she was telling Iyanna things Iyanna had no use for; that she was, in fact, telling them to the window, to the pewter sky, to the distance on the line; and that Iyanna, who knew her, was letting her, the way she had let the lie about the training run, except that this was the opposite of the lie, this was the truest she had been down a phone in a season. "He ate his second fish underwater sometimes. With his eyes closed. Like a man in a hot bath. Not every day. You couldn't predict it. The children would come for a week and never see it and then some Tuesday with nobody there he'd just — do it." She heard her own voice do something. "I saw him do it. The morning I left. The morning the woman came. He did it that morning. I thought — I remember thinking, *good, then*. As if it meant something. As if he was telling me it was all right to go."

"Adaeze."

"I'm all right."

"You're not, and that's all right," Iyanna said, in the voice she had, the sister voice, the one that did not negotiate. "You loved that ridiculous animal more than you have loved most people and there is no shame in it and you are allowed to stand in whatever foreign kitchen they have got you in and be not all right about it. I am not going to tell anyone. Who would I tell. The cat? The cat does not care. The cat has, frankly, taken the news of your absence as a promotion."

And Adaeze laughed — the broken half-sound, the one that is mostly the other thing — and put the heel of her hand against her eyes, one and then the other, and stood in the doorway and let her sister hold the line open across all that

distance and say nothing into it for a while, which was a thing Iyanna had never been good at and was, now, doing on purpose, for her, at the cost of every instinct she had.

"What will you do with him," Adaeze said, at last.

"Eze asked me to ask you. He didn't want to — he said it wasn't his to decide. He said you had a place, maybe. He said keepers sometimes have a place."

"The far end," Adaeze said. "Past the filtration shed, where the ground rises, there's — there are two others there. Under the flame-of-the-forest. The big one. He'll know the spot. Tell him the flame tree. Tell him — " She stopped. "Tell him not to make a thing of it. Professor would have hated a thing being made. Just the spot, and the tree, and someone to do it who knew him. Eze knew him. Eze should do it."

"I'll tell him."

"And the children — " Adaeze said, and then could not, for a moment, go on, because the children were the part that undid her; the children who had named him, who had argued his name into being years before she arrived, who would come on Monday with their classes and their faces and ask where Professor was. "Don't lie to the children," she said. "If they ask. Eze will know how. They're better at it than we are, the children. They'll be sad properly for an afternoon and then they'll be fine, which is more than I'll manage. Just — don't pretend he's been moved to another sanctuary or some — don't do that. He was old and he died on his rock in the sun and that is a good death, that is the death you'd want for anyone you loved, and they can have that, they can carry that. It's true and it's bearable. Give them the true bearable one."

"The true bearable one," Iyanna repeated, and there was something in how she said it, a catch, that told Adaeze her

sister had heard more in the sentence than otters; had heard, perhaps, that her sister was a person who now sorted the world into truths that could be carried and truths that could not, and had become, somewhere in this season, fluent in the difference in a way she had not been before; and that this, too, was on the list of things Iyanna had decided not to ask.

"Yes," Adaeze said. "The true bearable one."

They stayed on the line a while longer. Iyanna told her the roof was finished and held; that the nephew had done good work and she had paid him and kept the receipt; that the new otter — *Yusuf,* Iyanna said, *your Yusuf, your imperial decree has been carried out, Eze has put up a little sign, the children are furious, two of them are not speaking to the administration* — that Yusuf had, in the way of young things, already half-forgotten there had been an older animal who ran the place, and was busy being the kind of otter who did not yet know the world could take anything from him. Adaeze listened to all of it. She held the beige receiver and looked at the pewter sky and listened to her sister make, deliberately, out of roof receipts and otter politics, a warm ordinary place for her to stand in for a few minutes, six thousand kilometres from home, and she understood that this was Iyanna making tea; that everyone, everywhere, the whole world over, when there was nothing to be done and someone they loved was hurting at a distance, reached for the same small useless necessary thing; the hands needed something kind to do.

"I have to go," Iyanna said, finally. "It's the middle of your evening and it's costing somebody something, this call, I can feel it, these calls always feel like they're costing something."

They were, Adaeze thought. Somewhere a log existed: *a call was made, by her, of approximately this length, from approximately this place*. The content not recorded. Only the surface. The surface of a woman learning her otter had died. She found she did not mind, today. Let it be in the log. Let the gentlest people in the world know that on a Friday a keeper had stood in their back kitchen and grieved an animal. It was the truest entry the log would ever hold.

"Thank you for telling me yourself," Adaeze said.

"Who else would tell you," Iyanna said. "Come home, Adaeze. When you can. I won't ask again in this call, I've decided I'm only allowed to say it once per call now or it loses its — but. When you can." A pause. "The house is here. The chair is here. The flame tree's got room. That's not — I don't mean it morbidly. I mean there's room. For all of it. Whatever it turns out to be. There's room."

"I know," Adaeze said. "I'll come."

"Good."

"Goodbye, Yanna."

"Eat something," said Iyanna, and was gone.

Adaeze stood with the dead receiver against her shoulder for a moment, the way you do, as if the line might have something more in it; and then she put it back on its beige cradle on the wall, carefully, two-handed, the way she did most things now.

The spoke had gone quiet behind her.

Not the awkward quiet of people who have overheard something private and do not know where to put their faces; the other quiet, the deliberate one, the one these people were so good at — the quiet of a room that has decided, without conferring, to make itself easy to be sad in. André had taken his phone call elsewhere. Lukasz was at his docket with his

head down, present but not looking, holding the space without occupying it. And Eva had, at some point during the call, put the kettle on, so that when Adaeze turned back into the room the first thing she met was the rising whine of it climbing toward the boil, the sound that meant, in this place, *we cannot fix it and we are not going to pretend we can but we can do this one small warm thing while you stand there with the unfixable.*

Therèse was in the chair by the window. The one that did not complain. She must have come in during the call; her coat was on its peg, dark at the shoulders; she had a cup already, and she did not get up, and she did not say she was sorry, and she did not ask what had happened, because she had heard, from Adaeze's side of it, exactly what had happened, and she knew that the worst thing you could do to a person in the doorway with a dead receiver still warm in their hand was to make them explain.

She said: "Tell me about him."

And Adaeze understood that this was the kindest possible sentence; that Therèse had reached past *I'm sorry,* which asks the griever to receive, and past *what happened,* which asks the griever to report, to the one request that was actually a gift: *tell me about him,* which asked only that Adaeze keep talking about something she loved, for a little longer, in a warm room, while a kettle climbed toward the boil and four people who refused things for a living arranged themselves quietly around her grief like a windbreak.

So she told them.

She took the cup Eva put in her hands — both hands, around the warmth — and she sat down in one of the chairs that complained, and she let it complain, and she told them about Professor. She told them about the rock, and the

second fish, and the anthem, and the eyes closed underwater. She told them how the children had named him before her time, in some lost committee of six-year-olds, and how no adult had ever been able to discover why *Professor,* and how it had simply been true from before anyone could remember, the way the best names are. She told them he bit, sometimes, not from malice but from opinion.

She told them what he weighed — not in numbers; she had never weighed him, you did not weigh Professor, he would not have stood for it — but in the hands, which knew: how an otter is heavier than he looks, and then, lifted, lighter, because halfway up he decides to allow it and goes long and loose along your forearms, all that muscle giving itself over, so that for a moment you were holding something that had chosen, briefly, to be held. Twelve years her hands had known that exact weight, the way they knew the latch of the night-house and the swollen feed-room door you had to lift to close. Her hands had not yet stopped knowing it.

She told them about the comma-shaped scar on the back of her hand, which was not his — it was a sub-adult's, years ago — but which she had let everyone believe was his, because it made a better story and because Professor had the kind of dignity that could carry a scar he had not actually inflicted.

She told them he had been on his rock, in the morning sun, in the place he liked. That it had looked like nothing. That it had looked like sleeping.

And the spoke listened — Eva at her laptop turned away from it, Lukasz with his pen down at last, André come quietly back in to lean in the doorway, Therèse in the chair that did not complain with her cup in her two hands — the gentlest people in the world, who would not let her publish a

thing that would save two million children, who had made a researcher's life work into a drawer, who would, when the season turned, ask Adaeze to do a thing she did not yet know the full shape of; they listened to her grieve an otter on a Friday evening, and they made her tea, and not one of them tried to make it mean anything, or be a lesson, or be about the larger matter; they just let an otter be an otter, and a death be a death, and a woman far from home be sad about a small warm life that had ended well in the sun.

It was, Adaeze thought later, lying awake in the attic with the three papers over her heart and a fourth grief now lodged somewhere lower and quieter, the most purely kind thing they had done for her since she came. And it frightened her more than anything Hadiya had said.

Because Hadiya had said: *the keeping shapes the keepers.* Hadiya had said: *in two hundred years they will not be Therèse.* And Adaeze had sat in a library and been unable to push against it. But here was the counter-argument, and it was not an argument, it was a kettle; it was four tired people who refused things for a living and had, when a stranger's otter died, become for an evening the warmest room she had ever stood in. You could not re-derive that. It was not in the folio. It was not architecture. It was just people, being good, in the small unrewarded way that left no record, on an ordinary Friday, because that was who they had decided to be.

And the unbearable thing — the thing that kept her awake — was that both were true. That they were the warmest room in the world *and* that the keeping shaped the keepers *and* that the two facts did not cancel, did not even touch; they ran alongside each other into the dark like two rails, the same distance apart forever, and the train ran on them, and

the train was the world, and it was a good world, genuinely good, better than any that had been, and somewhere under its floor was one room, and somewhere in a house by a lagoon was one box, and somewhere out in the city was a tired young woman with two cups of tea who was right, and here in the attic was a woman with four griefs and three letters and no idea at all which rail was the one her grandmother had wanted her to walk.

Professor had died on his rock, in the sun. It had looked like nothing. It had looked like sleeping.

It was, she decided, holding onto it in the dark, the one thing in the whole season that was simply and only good, with no second rail running beside it: that an old animal she had loved had had a long life in a clean lagoon and a warm rock and children who named him, and had died without fear in the morning light, in the one place he liked best, and had not, at the end, had to know a single thing he did not want to know.

She envied him that. She was honest enough, in the dark, to know that she envied him that most of all.

Then she slept, and in the morning there was tea, because there was always, in that place, tea.

Chapter Thirteen

What the Custody Costs

"You have seen us refuse," Therèse said, a few days later. "I want now to show you what refusing costs. Not what it costs us. We have spoken of that; you watched Mathias; you know what it costs us. I want to show you what it costs them. The refused. I want you to see it because I think you have begun, without saying so, to make us a little more bearable in your mind than we deserve to be, and I would rather you not. It is easier to keep doing this work honestly when the people near you refuse to let it become comfortable. You have that quality. I am going to use it."

They did not take a tram, this time. They took a train, a long one, most of a day, north and east, into a flat country of canals and wind, and at the end of it a small city Adaeze did not know, grey and brick and handsome in a sober way, and in it a building that had been, once, a customs house, on a quay where no customs had been collected in a hundred years.

The archive was in the cellars.

It was not, the archive, what the word had made Adaeze expect; it was not miles of shelving, not a vault; it was a single long low room, dry and cool and very clean, with a concrete floor and good light, and along one wall a run of grey filing cabinets that did not look like enough — that looked, in fact, like far too few, like the filing of a medium-sized dental practice — until you understood what

Therèse told you next, which was that this was all of it. That this was every refusal the Custody had made, in the closed half of the fifth thing, in forty years, across the whole earth.

It was cold in a way Brussels never managed — Brussels was wet and grudging and changed its mind by afternoon. This was a made chill, a kept one, held at a single unmoving temperature by something humming low behind a grille: the temperature of a room built to outlast everyone who would ever stand in it. It came up off the concrete through the soles of her shoes and into the bones of her Lagos feet, which had not, in all this season, entirely forgiven the north; and she thought, as she thought a dozen quiet times a day, of the lagoon — of a heat that wrapped you like a hand and asked nothing and that you never had to earn. She felt the distance home as a temperature. She let it into her anyway. It belonged to the room, and the room, she was beginning to understand, was where they came to be told the truth.

"It is not many," Therèse said. "People imagine it is many. They imagine us refusing constantly, a great machine of no. It is not. In forty years it is — " she touched the nearest cabinet " — this. A few hundred. Fewer than one a month. We are not busy. We are the opposite of busy. We exist so that, almost always, the answer can be yes — so that the dome can be true — and we step in only at the few hundred places, across forty years and eight billion people, where yes would end the possibility of all the other yeses. We are very nearly nothing. That is the design. A thing this powerful must be very nearly nothing, or it becomes everything."

"Show me one," Adaeze said.

She had not meant to say it so flatly. But she had learned, this season, that Therèse respected the flat request more than the soft one; that softness, to Therèse, was a kind of

asking-to-be-protected, and Therèse would protect you, and the protection was itself a sort of withholding.

"Yes," Therèse said. "I brought you here to show you one. I have chosen it. I want you to know that I have chosen it — that I am not opening a drawer at random; that I have selected, deliberately, the one I find hardest, because I do not think it would be honest to show you an easy one and let you think the easy one is typical. They are none of them easy. But this one I cannot make easy even to myself, and so it is the one I will show you."

She did not go to the cabinets.

She went to a table in the corner, where a single folder had already been laid out, squared, waiting; she had arranged this in advance, then; she had known, before they took the train, exactly which folder, and had asked someone to have it ready; and that small fact — the forethought of it, the care — sat in Adaeze's chest beside everything else.

"His name was Tomas," Therèse said. "He is dead now. He died four years ago, an old man, in his bed, of an ordinary thing. So I am not showing you a living person; I want you to know that; the living ones I will not show you, it would not be right, but Tomas is past being harmed by my telling you, which is the only reason I can. He was a poet."

"A poet."

"A poet. A good one — I am told a good one; I do not have the languages to judge; the people who do have told me he was the real thing, that he is taught now, that there are children who learn three of his poems the way children learn the poems that are load-bearing in a language. He wrote in a small tongue. He spent his life in a small place. He was not, in his lifetime, famous, except in the way a person can be famous in one valley. He grew — this matters — he grew, in

his garden, as a hobby, as the thing his hands did while his mind made lines, flowers. He bred them. He was, by all accounts, happiest there, in the dirt, an old man among his flowers, muttering."

"What did he do."

"He wrote a poem," Therèse said.

She opened the folder.

"He wrote a poem," she said, "that was also — and he did not know this; I want to be as clear about this as Dr. Mwangi was about the researcher; Tomas did not know — a poem that was also a method. It was a long poem. It was a poem about his flowers, about the breeding of them, about patience and crossing and waiting and the way you make, over years, from two ordinary things, a third thing that has never existed. It was, the people who understand these things tell me, a genuinely great poem about exactly that, about horticulture and patience and time and a man's love for the slow made things. And it was, read with the other eye — read the way we are cursed to read — a complete and elegant and correct account of how to do the same thing with something that was not a flower. The crossing. The patience. The making, from two ordinary obtainable things, of a third thing that had never existed and should never exist. He had found the shape of it. He had found it in his garden, in his flowers, honestly, as a metaphor, because it was a true shape and true shapes recur, and he had written the most beautiful possible instructions for a thing he would have died rather than make, and he had thought he was writing about delphiniums."

Adaeze looked at the folder.

"What did you do," she said.

"We refused it," Therèse said. "The poem. It had been accepted by a journal — a literary journal, in his language; small; good. It came to us the way the researcher's paper came to us; the literary journals are in the arrangement too; everything that is published is, in the end, in the arrangement, because the arrangement is simply the promise of the publishing world that the dome will be allowed to stay true. We refused it. The poem was not published. Tomas received a letter from the journal — courteous, regretful, in the ordinary form — saying that they would not, after all, be able to run it."

"And that was all?"

"No," Therèse said. "That was not all. That is the part I brought you here to see. If that had been all, it would be a small sad thing, a poem unpublished, of which the world is full, and most of them unpublished for no reason at all, for fashion, for an editor's bad morning. That would have been bearable. But it was not all, because of what the poem was. A researcher's method, refused, sits in a drawer. A poet is not a drawer. A poet had found the shape, in his own head, in his own garden, by a route that was natural to him — and the terror, for us, the thing that does not let us simply refuse a poem and walk away, is that a man who has found a true shape once, by walking through his own garden, can find it again. Can write it again, differently. Can say it, at dinner, to a friend. Can put it, without knowing, into the next poem, and the next. The shape was in him. We had refused the poem. We had not refused — we could not refuse — the man."

"So you watched him," Adaeze said.

Her voice did a thing. She heard it do the thing.

"So we watched him," Therèse said. "For the rest of his life. Thirty-one years. From the refusal of the poem, when he was fifty, until he died in his bed at eighty-one. Thirty-one years of a person — of several people, in rotation, it is too long for one — knowing where Tomas was. What Tomas published. Who Tomas talked to. We did not — I want to be exact — we did not stop his life. He went on being a poet. He published many more poems; we read every one before it ran, and all but that one were only poems, and we let them run, and some of them are the poems the children now learn. He had friends; we did not take them. He had the garden; we did not touch the garden. He never knew. He lived, by every external measure, a free man's life, a good life, a celebrated old age, and he died loved, in his bed, of an ordinary thing, never having been told that for thirty-one years there had been, at the edge of his life, always, a person whose job was to read him before the world was allowed to."

"That is — " Adaeze began.

"Yes," Therèse said. "It is. Whatever word you were going to use, it is. I have used them all, over the years, about this folder. I keep using them. None of them makes it not have happened. He was a good man who grew flowers and wrote about them, and he found, by accident, through pure love of a slow honest thing, a shape that could end cities, and for the crime of having a mind that found it he was, for the second half of his life, never again entirely alone, and never knew it, and the never-knowing was the kindest part, the same as it was the kindest part for the researcher, the same as it would be — " she stopped.

She did not finish it.

But Adaeze finished it, in her own head, in the cool clean cellar, with the grey cabinets that were too few along the

wall: *the same as it would be for Iyanna.*

Because this was the thing. This was the exact thing. Tomas had grown flowers and found a shape and been watched for thirty-one years without knowing.

And in a house by a lagoon there was a box, and in the box were the letters of four people who had built the shape on purpose, and a sister who would, if Adaeze said one wrong word, become a person at whose edge there was always, now, someone reading; a sister who had decided not to ask; a sister who had said *the house is here, the chair is here, I am here;* a sister who would go on saying it, warmly, for the rest of her life, never knowing that her warmth was being read before the world was allowed to have it.

Adaeze had been protecting Iyanna from exactly this. She had carried the secret of the box, against every argument, for exactly this reason, though she had not had the picture of it until now, until Tomas, until the cellar; she had only had the feeling; and here was the feeling given its full body, thirty-one years long, in a folder a good woman in a grey coat had laid out in advance because she could not make it easy even to herself.

And the unbearable part — the part that made Adaeze put her hand flat on the cold table to keep something level in herself — her hands took the table's temperature the way they took everything, by touch, because her hands were the part of her that had never learned to lie — was that she could not even be sure she had chosen right.

Because Tomas, watched for thirty-one years, had also not ended a city. The watching had been, perhaps, the reason the shape in his head had stayed in his head; or it had been thirty-one years of wholly unnecessary shadow over an innocent man who would never have done anything; and

there was no way to know which, there was never any way to know which, that was the entire nature of the thing — you could not run the world twice and see.

The Custody had spent thirty-one years and the quiet labour of several careful people on a man who, very probably, would have been harmless if left entirely alone. Or who would not have been. There was no instrument. There was only the folder, and the cabinets that were too few, and the dome upstairs in the world that was, all this while, going on being true.

"Why do you keep it," Adaeze said. "The folder. Him. Why keep the record at all. You could refuse and not write it down. You could refuse and forget. It would be — it would be easier. You would not have a cellar full of the people you have shadowed. You would not have to be the kind of people who can produce, on request, the exact cost. Why keep it."

Therèse was quiet for a moment. Outside and above, faintly, gulls; the quay; the flat north light coming down through the high cellar windows onto the grey cabinets.

"Because the day we stop keeping it," she said, "is the day we have decided it does not need to be carried. And I told you what I think of bearing versus carrying. The record is how we carry it. The cabinets are our hands being full. If we let ourselves refuse and forget — if we made it so that no one, ever, had to come down to this cellar and open this folder and say his name, Tomas, and feel exactly this — then within a generation we would refuse easily, and within two we would refuse widely, and within three we would be the thing your young woman in the library believes we are already becoming."

She had put her hand on the nearest cabinet without appearing to have decided to; her fingers rested on the grey

metal the way another person's hand might rest on the lid of a coffin, or on a gate they were not yet sure they meant to open.

"The cellar is the discipline," she said. "It is the only discipline we have found that works. We keep every one. We keep them so that someone, sometimes, has to feel the full weight, on purpose, in the cool and the quiet, with the gulls outside; so that the weight stays real; so that we never, ever, get good at this."

Somewhere above them a gull went over, and then another — the sound coming down thin and bright through the high windows: the quay going about its afternoon, the boats, the wet north light, the free unwatched world that sat all day directly on top of this room and did not know the room was there. Adaeze had stopped feeling her feet some while ago. The chill had come all the way up through the concrete and she had not moved to fight it and did not move now. It seemed the only honest posture left to her in that place: to be cold on purpose, and let it cost her something, while a good woman told her the truth.

She looked at Adaeze. "I bring someone down here perhaps once a year. A new officer, usually. I have never before brought someone who was not one of us. I am breaking, by bringing you, something that is nearly a rule. I am doing it because you are about to be asked to carry something heavier than this folder, and I will not ask you to carry it without having let you feel what the carrying is. That would be the researcher's letter. I will not send you a courteous note in the ordinary form. I would rather bring you to the cellar."

Adaeze stood in the cool clean room with her hand flat on the table beside the folder of a dead poet she had never met

and would now never not carry, and she understood that Therèse had, in her own grave and honest way, done the most dangerous possible thing to her — more dangerous than Hadiya, far more, because Hadiya had given her an argument she could resist, and Therèse had given her the truth: all of it, the worst of it, laid out and squared on a table in advance, with the cost named and the doubt named and the not-knowing named.

There is no argument in the world as persuasive as a person who refuses to lie to you even when the lie would help them.

That was the Custody's deepest weapon, she saw, and it was not a weapon at all, which was exactly why it was the deepest. They told you the whole crushing truth and trusted that a person who had been told it would, in the end, carry the heavy thing for them — not because they had been deceived, but because they had not been. Not in spite of the cost, but because of it.

The way Mama Nneka had signed the yes not in spite of the no but only, only, after it.

She did not say *all right*. She had nothing, this time, even that small.

She reached out and she touched the edge of the folder — two fingers, lightly, top, bottom, the gate — and she did not open it further, and she did not close it, and Therèse, who had brought her six thousand kilometres and forty years and one cool cellar precisely so that she would do something exactly like that, watched her do it, and named the poet once more, quietly, into the clean dry air, the way you say a name at a grave —

"Tomas," she said.

— and then she gathered the folder, and squared it, and put it back in the drawer it had waited in, and slid it shut — and the drawer stuck, an inch from home, the one swollen runner in all that dry order, so that she had to set the heel of her hand to it and press, once, without irritation, the way you deal with a fault you have known for years and chosen to live with rather than mend; and it gave, and went home; and the sound of the drawer going home was the loudest thing in the room.

They went back up into the grey handsome city and the flat north light, and they did not talk on the quay, and they got the long train south, and somewhere in the middle of it, in the dark, over the flat country with the wind turbines turning their slow patient arms against a sky going violet, Therèse fell asleep, which Adaeze had never seen her do; fell asleep upright in her seat with her hands in her lap and her face emptied of its procedure, an ordinary tired woman of sixty who had spent the day carrying a folder up out of a cellar so that a keeper from Lagos would not be lied to; and Adaeze sat awake beside her the whole way, and watched the turbines, and did not wake her, and let her have it.

Chapter Fourteen

The Mistake

The season turned on a Tuesday, which Therèse had said it would, because it was always Tuesday.

It turned with a phone call Eva took at the spoke at seven in the morning, before the kettle, which was itself the sign, because there was always the kettle first; and Eva listened, and did not write anything down, and put the phone back on its beige cradle, and stood for a moment with her hand still on it, and then said, to the room, in a voice that had had all the spare warmth pressed out of it:

"They have the third leg."

No one said anything.

"Eva," Therèse said.

"They have the third leg, or they will have it by the weekend, which is the same thing. The reading is — it is not a guess, Therèse, I would not say it if it were a guess. There is something they have put up, in the night, on a server, and it is the third leg, and it is signed the way the first one was signed, and there is, this time, a date in it. They have put a date in it. They are telling us when."

"When," said André, who had come to the doorway.

"Eleven days," Eva said.

And the spoke, which Adaeze had only ever seen be a household, became, in the space of those two words, the other thing it had always also been, the thing under the household, the way Therèse's composure was the thing

under her fear: it became a station. Quietly. No one raised a voice. But Lukasz was already at a cabinet; André was already on the second phone; Eva was already turning the laptop; and Therèse was already, Adaeze saw, looking at her — at Adaeze — with an expression that was not the long considering look, that was something the long considering look had been protecting her from all along.

"We have to go to the city of pale stone," Therèse said. "Today. You and I. They will want you near the room."

"Because you are going to ask me," Adaeze said.

"Because we are going to ask you," Therèse said. "Yes. Not today. I will not ask you today, or tomorrow; there is a procedure for the asking, there is always a procedure, and the procedure is not quick, the procedure is built to be not quick, on purpose, so that it cannot be done in a panic. But we have eleven days, and the procedure is nine of them, and so we have to begin it today, and so we have to go." She was already taking the grey coat off the peg. "I am sorry. I had wanted you to have more of the slow part. I had wanted — it does not matter what I had wanted."

They went to the city of pale stone.

*

It was, when they came around the particular corner and the Repository was the whole of what was in front of them, exactly as it had been: the low wide dome of pale stone, the streets running to its edge and stopping, the broad open doors at the four cardinal points, the steady absent traffic of a market, of a thing that did not insist on being noticed. It was a bright day. The river was low and bright. There were, on the wide shallow steps that were not steps, that were only

the place where the city's pavement became the Repository's floor, a scatter of people doing the things people did there — reading on the warm stone, eating a lunch out of paper, a class of children in two obedient lines being brought, perhaps, for the first time, to be shown where you came when there was a thing you wanted to read that the school did not have.

Adaeze stood and looked at it and felt, under the dread, the same thing she had felt the first time: that it was true. That it was the truest building in the world. That a child in two obedient lines was about to be told *you may read anything here, you, anything, no one will ask you why,* and that it would be true when they told her.

"It is still beautiful," she said.

"It is still true," Therèse said. "That is better than beautiful. Come. Henri is expecting us. He has been holding the room since — he has been holding the room a long time. He will be glad to see you. He is fond of you, in the way he is fond of things, which you have to know how to read."

They went in by the south door.

And the inside was the inside: the largest room Adaeze had ever been in, quiet in the way that contained a great deal of small sound, the stacks running out in every direction further than the eye would credit, the light coming down indirect and high, the warm floor, the readers in their armchairs and at their long tables, the child — there was always a child — cross-legged on a cushion with a volume too large, both hands, turning a page.

She found herself reading the room the way she read an enclosure on the first morning — the keeper's habit, her own; not the space but the lives in it. And she thought Henri must read it the same way, every day, all day: not the dome

but the readers, not the building but the cross-legged child. A man asleep upright behind a folded newspaper, defended against the world by the pretense of having meant only to rest his eyes. Two students at a long table, one working, one watching the one who worked, in love and not reading a word. An old woman with a stack of gardening books, copying something out by hand, her lips moving. Another child, a boy of nine, on the floor against a shelf-end with an atlas open to a country whose borders had changed since the book was printed, tracing the old line with one finger. A woman in a yellow scarf reading a paperback with her shoes slipped off, one foot tucked up under her. A man working a boiled sweet against his teeth, the illegal click of it the loudest law he meant to break all day. None of them looking up. None of them knowing they had come, on an ordinary bright morning, to the one building in the world that was about to ask them to be something other than readers.

Henri met them two rows in.

He looked older than Adaeze remembered, which was only four weeks; or rather he looked the same and she looked at him differently, knowing now what he held, what he had held the whole time, the tall quiet man who had said *Henri* and *Madam Okonkwo* and almost nothing else; and he inclined his head to Therèse, and then to Adaeze, and he said, "Madam Okonkwo. You came back," with the very small warmth she now knew how to read, and she understood that it had cost him something to say even that, and that it was, from Henri, an embrace.

"Henri," she said. "Yes."

"It is — " he began.

He did not finish, because that was when it started.

*

She would not, afterward, be able to put it in the right order. She tried, many times, for many people, and it would not go in the right order, because it had not happened in an order; it had happened all at once, the way the worst things do, in a building built for the slow turning of pages.

There were, suddenly, more people than there had been.

Not many. That was what she kept trying to say to people afterward and could not make them understand: it was not a mob, it was not a crowd, it was perhaps nine people, perhaps eleven, ordinary-looking people, young and not young, who had been, a moment before, indistinguishable from the readers, because they had been readers, they had come in over the preceding hour by the four doors the way everyone came in, and had sat, and had read, and had waited; and now they stood, all at once, in a loose arc, and they were not loud, they did not shout, they simply stood and began, in unison, to do the thing they had come to do, which was the most devastating thing they could possibly have done, which was: nothing violent at all.

They began to speak.

Not all together; in a kind of round, one starting, then another, so that the words overlapped and carried and would not be stopped by stopping any one mouth: *under this floor there is a room. Under the library where you may read anything, there is one room you may not read. They have kept it from you your whole life. Ask them. Ask them where the stairs go. There are stairs. Ask them what is under the floor —*

And one of them — a young man, very calm, with a thing in his hand that Adaeze understood after a moment was a

small camera, a phone, held up, held high, turning slowly to take in the dome, the readers, the stacks, the truth of the place and then the other truth they were naming into it — one of them walked, not fast, toward the row of stacks behind which was the small wood door that was no different from a dozen others, the door Therèse had opened with a small ordinary key a lifetime ago, the door to the antechamber, to the dual key, to the stairs.

He knew where it was.

That was the thing that turned Adaeze's blood. He walked toward it without searching. He knew where it was. They had it; somewhere, somehow, in the third leg or by some other road, they had the location of the door; and he was walking to it with a camera held up, to open it, or to try to open it, or only to stand in front of it and say *here, here, it is here, look,* in front of the hundred ordinary readers who were now beginning, all through the great quiet room, to lower their books and lift their faces and listen.

And the Custody had no one to stop him.

That was the second thing that turned her blood, and it turned it the other way, colder and deeper, because she understood it in the same instant she understood the first: there were no guards. There had never been any guards. It was the whole of the design, the thing Therèse had said by the half-dome in Brussels, the thing the building was *for* — no steps, no guards, the dome is true, anyone may enter, anyone, even these, *especially* these, because a Repository that screened the people who came to read would not be a Repository. They had built a fortress with no walls and no soldiers and had defended it for forty years with nothing but the fact that no one knew there was anything to attack. And now someone knew. And there was no one, and nothing,

between the young man with the camera and the door.

Except Henri.

Henri moved.

She did not see him decide to. She did not think he decided to; she thought, afterward, that there had been no deciding in it, that it was the same thing as her own hand going to the gate-post, a thing forty years in the body, a thing that did itself: the old man crossed the space between himself and the door, quickly, far more quickly than she would have thought he could, and he put himself in front of it. Not fighting. Not raising a hand. He simply put his body in the doorway, his back to the door, his arms a little out, an old tall man in a grey cardigan making of himself the only wall the building had ever had, and he said — she heard it, across the room, in the terrible gathering quiet — he said, "No. You may not. I am sorry. No."

We only ever say no.

And the young man with the camera did not stop, because he could not stop, because there were now faces turning everywhere and the whole thing would be worth nothing if he stopped, and he came on, and he put out his free arm — not a blow, Adaeze would swear afterward it was not a blow, it was the arm you put out to move past someone in a doorway, the arm you put out on a crowded tram — and Henri, who was eighty, who had been holding the room a long time, who had put his soft old body where the wall should have been, went back against the door and then sideways, and his feet did not find the floor where his body expected the floor to be, and he went down.

He went down the way the old go down — all at once, with none of the catching the young do without thinking. His head found the edge of the stone shelf-end on the way, a

sound Adaeze heard across the whole room, a small flat sound, not loud, the worst sound she had ever heard, and then he was on the warm floor of the truest building in the world, and he was not moving, and there was, spreading, slow, under his white hair, on the pale stone, the dark.

And then everything that had been slow became fast.

*

She saw, in fragments, in the wrong order, forever:

She saw Therèse already moving — not toward the young man, not toward the door, toward Henri, on her knees on the stone beside him, her grey coat pooling, her hands doing something careful and terrible to his head, her voice saying his name, *Henri, Henri,* in a register Adaeze had not known it had.

She saw the young man with the camera stop, finally, all the way stop, the camera forgotten in his hand and pointing at nothing, his calm gone, his face the face of a person who has been telling himself for a long time that what he was going to do was not violent and has just learned, in one flat small sound, the exact size of his self-deception.

She saw the readers, the ordinary readers, on their feet now, some coming forward, a woman in a yellow scarf with her hands already out saying *I'm a doctor, let me, I'm a doctor,* the world doing the thing the world did, the kindness arriving uncalled.

And she saw — this was the fragment that would not leave her, the one that was the whole chapter of her life she was now in — she saw another of them, another Custody officer, one she did not know, a woman, who must have been there all along, who must have been one of Henri's, who came out

of somewhere fast and did not go to Henri because Therèse was at Henri; who went, instead, to the young man with the camera; and who took it.

Took it. The camera, the phone, the thing with the dome and the words and the door in it. She did not ask. She did not say *we only ever say no*. She crossed the space and she took it out of his stopped hand, fast, hard, a wrench, the first genuinely fast hard ungentle thing Adaeze had seen any of them do, and the young man staggered with the force of it, and she had it, and she did something to it, pressed it against the stone, her heel, Adaeze did not see exactly, and it was done, the thing in it was done, gone, the words and the dome and the door, gone; and she stood up with the dead thing in her hand over the boy who had hurt Henri, breathing hard, and for one instant — one instant, in the truest building in the world, with Henri's blood on the pale floor and a hundred readers watching — the Custody was a fortress after all.

It was an instant. It passed. The woman looked at the dead camera in her own hand as though it belonged to a stranger; her face did what the young man's had done; and she dropped it, and went, too late, to help with Henri.

But Adaeze had seen it. And the hundred readers had seen it. And the other ten re-derivers had seen it. Everyone in the truest building in the world had seen the thing the Custody swore it never did, done fast and hard by a frightened good person who had not decided to do it any more than Henri had decided to fall; and there was no taking that back, no procedure for it, no record-keeping that would carry it, because it had not been refused in a quiet room by people who wept; it had been done, with a heel, on a floor, in front of children.

Both fictions had broken in the same ten seconds. The re-derivers had sworn they were not violent, and an old man was on the floor with his blood coming out. The Custody had sworn it was not a fortress, and a woman had taken a thing by force and crushed it under her heel. Both true. Both, in the same ten seconds, false. And between the two broken fictions, on the warm pale stone, an eighty-year-old man who had spent his life saying *no* quietly was being held by a woman in a grey coat who was saying his name as though saying it could keep him.

*

He did not die.

Adaeze learned this hours later, in a corridor of an ordinary hospital in the city of pale stone, an ordinary hospital where ordinary people were born and mended and died, where no one knew that the old man in the third room had spent forty years as the only wall of the truest building in the world. He did not die. He had bled the way head wounds bleed, too much, frighteningly; he had a fracture; he was eighty; it would be slow, and it might not be complete, the mending; there were words the doctors used about *the coming days* that Adaeze had heard used about her own grandmother. But he did not die. He woke, in the night, and knew his name, and asked — Therèse told her this, much later, and her voice when she told it was not steady — he woke and asked whether the door had held.

The door had held.

That was the fact. Adaeze made herself look at it, sitting in the ordinary corridor in the small hours with a paper cup of the ordinary hospital's ordinary terrible tea going cold in

her hands, because her hands needed a thing and there was a kettle even here, even here. The door had held. Henri had put his body in front of it and it had held. The camera had been taken and crushed and the thing in it had not gone out into the world; the woman's terrible fast hard ungentle act had worked; the dome was still, for the hundred readers and the eight billion others, true. The re-derivers had come to turn on the light in the hallway, and they had not. The light was still off. The price of the light staying off was an old man who might not walk again, and a young woman officer who would carry, for the rest of her life, the memory of her own heel on a stone floor, and a young man who had walked toward a door telling himself he was gentle and would never be able to tell himself that again.

The Custody had won. That was the thing she could not get to sit still. The Custody had won, and the winning was the worst thing she had seen, and the losing would have been worse, and there was no third thing, there was only the won and the worse-if-lost, and an old man asking in the night whether the door had held.

Therèse came and sat beside her in the corridor, eventually, in the small hours, and did not say anything for a long time. She had Henri's blood on the cuff of the grey coat; she had not changed it; Adaeze thought she did not know it was there, or knew and would not give it the insult of changing before she knew he would live.

"You saw," Therèse said, at last. It was not a question.

"I saw."

"What she did. The camera. Brigitta. Her name is Brigitta. She is — she is one of the gentlest people I know. She has a sister with a farm. She sends her nephews drawings. She has never, in twenty years — " Therèse

stopped. "You saw what she did."

"Yes."

"It was not allowed," Therèse said. "I want you to understand that clearly, because the temptation, now, for us, the great temptation, will be to find that it was allowed; to build, in the next weeks, a small true-sounding sentence in which what Brigitta did was permitted, was proportionate, was the necessary defense of the dome; and that sentence will be available, it will be lying right there ready to be picked up, and it will be the first yes. It will be the first time we say yes. *Yes, that was all right. Yes, under those circumstances, force.* And if we say it — if I let us say it — then your young woman in the library will have been right, and the drift will have started, and it will have started here, with Brigitta, who is the gentlest person I know, defending a thing that deserved defending, from people who were wrong to do what they did. That is how it will start, if it starts. Not with monsters. With Brigitta. With a good reason. There is always a good reason. The good reason is the whole of the danger."

"What will you do," Adaeze said.

"We will write it down," Therèse said. "All of it. Brigitta's heel. Exactly as it was. We will put it in the cellar, in the cool, with Tomas, with the others, and it will be the first entry of its kind, the entry that says *on this day we did the thing we swear we do not do,* and it will sit there, and once a year someone will have to take it out and read it and feel it, forever, so that we never, ever, decide it was all right. That is the only thing I know how to do. It is not enough. It is what there is. We carry it. We do not get to put it down and we do not get to call it something else. Brigitta will carry it most of all, and I will not take it from her by forgiving her, because

forgiving her would be the yes."

Adaeze sat in the ordinary corridor with the cold tea.

"Hadiya wasn't there," she said. She had not meant to say the name. It came out before she could keep it.

Therèse went very still.

"No," Adaeze said, into the stillness, because there was no road back now and because, she found, she did not want one; because she was tired, in the small hours, of the appetite of secrets, and this one she could let go of without anyone becoming a buff folder, this one was only hers. "A woman found me. At the branch in Brussels. One of them. Her name is Hadiya. She was — she wanted to talk, only to talk; she gave me a letter of my grandmother's; she made an argument. I did not tell you. I should have told you. I am telling you now. And I am telling you, because I watched her face, in my head, the whole time today — she would not have done this. The door, the camera, the boy who told himself he was gentle. She would not have. She said they were thirty people and most of them were tired, and I think — I think some of them are tired and careful and some of them are tired and not careful, the way you are careful and Brigitta, today, was not, and I think the thing that happened today happened on their side the way Brigitta happened on yours: the gentlest ones were not in the room."

Therèse was quiet for a long time.

"Thank you," she said, at last. "For telling me. I knew there was a thing. I have known for two weeks there was a thing. I did not ask, because — " a breath — "because I have learned that the things people tell you when you do not ask are the only ones worth having. I am glad it was that thing and not a worse one." She turned her head and looked at Adaeze in the ordinary fluorescent corridor light, and her

face was the face from the train, the unguarded one, the tired woman of sixty. "She is right that some of us are tired. She is right that the gentlest ones are not always in the room. She is right about a great many things, your Hadiya. She is right about everything except the one thing, which is what to do about it; and so am I; I am right about everything except the one thing; and the one thing is the only thing that matters, and neither of us knows it, and tomorrow or the day after I am going to have to begin a procedure that ends with me asking you to decide it for all of us, which is the most monstrous thing my monstrous gentle institution has ever done, and I am going to do it, because the alternative is worse, because there is always, God help us, a good reason."

She stood. She looked down at the blood on her own cuff, finally, and saw it, and did not flinch, and did not change it.

"Drink your tea," she said, gently. "Even cold. It is something for the hands. He is going to live, Adaeze. He asked whether the door held. He is going to live, and the door held, and those two things are the best news of the worst day, and I cannot, for the life of me, tell you whether they are good news, and that is the truest thing I will ever say to you, and I am saying it in a hospital corridor at four in the morning because it is the only place true enough to say it in."

And she went back down the corridor to sit with the old man who had been, for forty years, the only wall, and who had, today, held; and Adaeze sat alone with the cold tea and the three letters over her heart and the new thing in her, the heel on the stone, the small flat sound, the dark spreading on the pale floor of the truest building in the world; and she understood that the slow part was over, that there would be no more cellars and trams and fig buns and grief about otters; that in a day, or two, the procedure would begin; and

that at the end of it there was a folio open on a table three flights down, at the page she had read and could not unread, waiting for her to do the thing only she could do, the thing her grandmother had signed *no* to first.

Eleven days. Nine of procedure. She drank the cold tea.

Her hands, she noticed, had stopped shaking. She did not know when. She did not think it was a good sign. She thought it might be the thing Therèse had warned her about, in another country, a lifetime ago, on a tram: the beginning of being able to do it. The hands going quiet. The weight becoming bearable. The first, smallest, most reasonable yes.

Chapter Fifteen

Temptation

The note came the way the first contact had come: by no road that could be traced, into the one place she would be sure to find it.

It was in a book. On the third day of the procedure — the procedure that was, as Therèse had promised, slow, a matter of forms read aloud and signed and witnessed and set aside to rest a required number of hours before the next form, a thing built so that it could not be done in a panic and so that everyone who touched it would have time to feel the weight of having touched it — on the third day, in a free afternoon hour, Adaeze had gone up into the open dome of the central Repository, not to read, only to sit in the one place that was true; and she had taken down, more or less at random, a book of photographs of the deep sea, because the deep sea was the furthest thing she could think of from a folio three floors down; and between two pages, at a photograph of a small luminous fish that made its own light in water that had never seen the sun, there had been a slip of paper, folded once, in a hand she now knew.

The low bench by the river, below the third bridge, where the willows are. Tomorrow, any hour you can. I will wait all day. I will keep waiting until you come or until you send word that you will not. — H.

(I am sorry about the book. I could not think how else. I did not read over your shoulder. I only know you. You

would go to the dome, and you would not read about people, you would read about something with no people in it at all. The fish was a guess. I am glad it was a good one.)

Adaeze sat with the slip in the photograph book for a long time, in the true dome, under the high indirect light, and then she closed the book on the small luminous fish and put it back on its shelf and went down to find Therèse.

This was the new thing in her. She noticed it as she did it. The first time, she had hidden the contact, and then hidden the hiding, and the secret had made a place in her that wanted more secrets. And the secret had cost her — she had felt it cost her, in the hospital corridor, when she had finally set it down. So this time she did not hide it. She went and found Therèse in the small office the Custody kept off the antechamber level, where Therèse was reading a form she would not sign for another two hours because the form was required to rest, and she put the slip on the desk in front of her, and she said: "She has found me again."

Therèse read it. She read it twice, the way she read things. She set it down on the resting form, squared, the way she set things down.

"Yes," she said.

"I am telling you," Adaeze said, "because I did not, last time, and I did not like what the not-telling made of me. I am telling you, and now you know, and now you can do whatever it is you would do — stop me, follow me, send someone, I don't —"

"I am not going to do any of those things," Therèse said.

"You're not."

"No." She folded her hands on the desk. "I am going to do the hardest thing, which is the thing we are for, which is nothing. I am going to let you go and meet her, alone, and I

am not going to follow you, and I am not going to have you followed, and when you come back I am not going to ask you what was said unless you wish to tell me. And I am going to do this for a reason I want you to hear, because the reason is the whole of us." She looked at Adaeze. "If I stop you, I prove her. Do you see? She will have told you that we are a thing that decides, on your behalf, what you may hear, and what you may not, and who you may speak with, and who you may not — and if I stop you from walking to a bench by a river to hear an argument, then I will have become, in that one act, exactly the thing she says we are, and she will have won you more surely by my stopping you than she ever could by any sentence she says at the river. The only way I can answer her is to let you go and hear her and trust that you will come back. So. Go and hear her. She is — from what you have told me, and from what I have learned, which is not much; she is careful, your Hadiya; she is hard to learn — she is, I think, worth hearing. Go. Take the afternoon. The form will still be resting when you return."

"You're not afraid I won't come back."

Therèse was quiet for a moment.

"I am afraid of everything," she said, simply. "It is most of what I do. But I have decided, a long time ago, that I would rather lose something by trusting it than keep it by caging it, because the thing you keep by caging it is not the thing you wanted to keep. If you do not come back, then you were never ours to keep, and the failsafe was never going to work, because it only works on a person who is free, that is the whole terrible design of it, your grandmother saw to that — it will not open for a prisoner, it will only open for someone who could have walked to the river and not come back and chose to come back. So in a way." She almost did the thing

her face did. "In a way you walking to the river is part of the procedure. The most important part. The part no form can make you do. Go to the river, Adaeze."

So Adaeze went to the river.

*

The low bench was below the third bridge, where the willows were, exactly as the note had said. The river was low and bright, the same river she had seen run under the bridges on the worst day; it did not know it had been the worst day; it went on being a low bright river. The willows put their hands in it. It was a warm afternoon, the kind the city did well, and there were people along the bank doing the things people did — a man asleep over a book, two students with their feet in the water, a very old couple sharing one ice from one paper cup with two spoons.

Hadiya was on the bench.

She had no books today. That was the first thing Adaeze saw, and it struck her as wrong before she understood why: Hadiya without a stack of books was like Therèse without the grey coat, a person with the most characteristic thing about them set down. She sat with her hands empty in her lap and her dark scarf and her grey cardigan and she was looking at the river, and when she saw Adaeze coming she did not stand and did not smile and did not do any of the small social things; she only moved a little, to make room, on a bench that had plenty of room, which was not about room.

And there was no tea.

Adaeze noticed it as she sat down, the absence of it, the two cups that were not there; and Hadiya saw her notice.

"I did not bring tea," Hadiya said. "I thought about it. I have brought you tea twice and both times it was the right thing and I knew it was the right thing. And today I stood in my small kitchen with the cups in my hand and I could not do it. It seemed — after what happened in that building — it seemed obscene. To sit by a river and hand you a cup as though we were two women having an afternoon. An old man is in a hospital because of people who call themselves what I call myself. I could not bring the tea. I am sorry there is no tea. I find I mind it more than I expected to. The tea was how I told you I was not your enemy, and today I have nothing to tell you that with, and that is correct, that is as it should be, but I mind it."

"His name is Henri," Adaeze said.

"I know."

"Do you."

"I know his name is Henri," Hadiya said. "I know he is eighty. I know he put his body in a doorway and that a man I have eaten dinner with put him on the floor. I know that the man who did it has not slept since, that he is — you will not believe this, and you do not have to — that he is destroyed by it, that he did not mean it, that he has said to us, over and over, *I only put out my arm, I only meant to go past him,* and that this is true and that it does not matter that it is true, because Henri is eighty and the floor was stone. I know his name is Henri. I made myself learn it. I make myself learn all of them. It is the only discipline I have that I am sure of."

She was not, Adaeze saw, going to look away from it. She had not come to the river to be forgiven or to explain it away. She had come to sit inside it, the way the Custody sat inside its cellar.

"You disavow it," Adaeze said. "Is that the word. You've come to disavow it."

"I have come to do something harder than disavow it," Hadiya said. "Any fool can disavow a thing. I have come to tell you the truth about it, which is worse, which is that I cannot fully disavow it, because the people who did it are mine, they are not strangers, they are not a different movement I can point at and say *those are the bad ones, I am one of the good ones* — they are us, they came out of the same argument I made to you in the library, they read the same things, they want the same daylight, and they decided that the daylight was worth more than an old man's skull, and I think they were wrong, I think they were catastrophically wrong, I think they have set us back a generation and put blood on the one clean thing we had which was that we had never hurt anyone — and I cannot tell you that they are not me."

The willows moved in the water. Neither woman watched them.

"They are the version of me that ran out of patience. I have not run out of patience. But I know exactly where it is kept, the patience, and I know it is not infinite, and I know that the thing that happened in that building is what my own argument looks like when it stops being willing to wait. So. No. I do not get to disavow it cleanly. I get to sit by a river with the granddaughter of Perpetua and tell her that my side, too, has a cellar now, and a folder in it, and a name in the folder, and the name is Henri."

The river went by. The very old couple finished their ice and folded the paper cup with great ceremony and the old man put it in his pocket because there was no bin near, and the old woman put her hand on his knee.

"That is the most honest thing anyone has said to me this whole season," Adaeze said, "and I have been living among the most honest people I have ever met."

"Yes," Hadiya said. "I imagine it is. They are honest, your keepers. It is the thing I respect most about them and it is the thing that makes them most dangerous, because a person who is honest about the cost can get you to pay any price, if they are also the one who decides what the price buys. I am honest too. I am being honest now. The difference between us, the only difference that matters, is not honesty. We are both honest. The difference is that they are honest with you about a decision they have already made and will not let you unmake, and I am honest with you about a decision that is still yours. That is the whole of what I have to offer you. Not that I am kinder than they are. I am not. Not that I am safer. I am, this week, demonstrably not. Only that the thing they are about to take from you — the deciding — I am trying to give back."

Downstream the two students sat with their feet in the river and did not talk. The water went over their ankles and on — the same water that had run under the bridges on the worst day, and had not known it was the worst day, and would not know tomorrow either.

"They are not taking the deciding from me," Adaeze said. "They are asking me to decide. That is the opposite. Therèse let me walk to this river. She said if she stopped me she would prove you right. She said the failsafe won't even work on a prisoner, it only works on someone free enough to not come back. They are asking me. You keep saying they have decided. They haven't. They've left it to me. That's worse, do you understand, that's so much worse, I would give anything for them to have decided —"

And she stopped, because she heard what she had said.

Hadiya heard it too. She did not pounce on it. She let it sit by the river for a moment, the terrible sentence, *I would give anything for them to have decided,* and then she said, very gently, the gentlest she had been:

"Yes. That is the cleverest thing they do. It is so clever I do not think they even know they do it; I think they believe, completely, that they are being good, that leaving it to you is the respectful thing, the free thing. And it is. And it is also the way a thing this size gets carried by a person without the people who handed it to her ever having to be the ones who chose. They have arranged it — not on purpose, which is what makes it so hard to fight — they have arranged it so that the most monstrous decision a human being has been asked to make in forty years will be made by a keeper of otters from Lagos, alone, freely, and that whatever you choose, they will not have chosen it. If you use the failsafe, they did not ask you to; you were free; you decided. If you refuse, they did not stop you; you were free; you decided. They have made themselves innocent of the largest thing that will happen this century. That is the genius of them. They are so committed to not being tyrants that they have found a way to do the tyrant's work and keep clean hands, and the way is you."

Adaeze looked at the river. The willows put their hands in it and took them out and put them in again — patient, mindless, the only work a willow knows — and she thought, with the part of her that was always a keeper, that she would remember this exact stretch of water for the rest of her life.

"You're trying to make me angry at them," she said.

"I am trying to make you see them," Hadiya said. "Anger is your business, not mine. I would rather you not be angry.

Angry people make the mistake my friends made in that building. I would rather you be clear. And I will tell you the thing I came to tell you, the actual thing, and then I will stop, because I can feel myself starting to perform and you deserve better than a performance.

"I came to tell you not to use it. That is the offer, if you want to call it an offer; it is barely an offer; it asks you to do nothing, which is the hardest thing to ask. I am not asking you to join us. I looked at your face the whole time I talked, the way I do, the reading, and you are not going to join us, you are not a joiner, you are a keeper, you keep the thing in front of you, it is the deepest fact about you and it is why they chose you and it is why I will not get you. I am not asking you to come with me. I am asking you to do nothing. To not use it. To let the season turn, and let my friends finish what they are finishing, and let the door become knowable, in daylight, with all the danger of daylight, because the danger of daylight is at least a danger that belongs to everyone, and the safety of the dark belongs to four old ghosts and a keeper they have made their fifth. That is all."

The old couple had folded their empty cup away and were sitting in the particular stillness of two people who have said everything to each other and stayed.

"Do nothing. It is the one thing they cannot make you do, the same as it is the one thing I cannot make you do. We are, the two of us, completely without power over you, and you are the only person in the world that is true of, and it is true of you because of a door, and that is either the cruelest thing that has ever happened to a person or the freest, and I genuinely do not know which, and neither, I promise you, do they."

"And if I do nothing," Adaeze said, "and your friends finish, and the recipe is loose — the real one, not the door, the *other* thing, the one the lock keeps out of the basement —"

"That is not what is in the door," Hadiya said.

Adaeze went still.

"Listen to me," Hadiya said, and now there was something new in her voice, something that had been underneath the whole time and had not yet been let up. "Listen, because this is the thing I am least sure of, and the thing I most need you to hold, and I am going to say it once. The door, the thing they keyed to your blood, the thing they are asking you to rewrite — that is not the knife. They have let you believe it is the knife, or they have let you believe it is next to the knife, in the same room as the knife, so that protecting it feels like protecting the child. But the thing in that folio, the *recipe* they keep calling it — it is not how to make a weapon. You have read it. You tell me. Is it how to make a weapon?"

Adaeze did not answer. She could not answer. She had read it. It was not how to make a weapon. It was the shape of how to build a body that refuses. It was the architecture. It was the Custody's own self, the method of its own continuance, the thing that made the *no* stick across forty years. She had been calling it, in her own head, the lock; and a lock is a thing that protects a treasure; and she had not, until a young woman by a river asked her the plain question, made herself say what the treasure was.

The treasure was the Custody itself.

The thing in the door was not the knife. The thing in the door was the *hand that holds the door shut*. And the re-derivers were not trying to get the knife. They had said so,

and she had not believed them, because the Custody had let her not believe them. They were trying to get the recipe for the *hand*. So that they could build a hand of their own. Or so that they could show everyone the hand existed. Or so that they could take the hand apart. She did not know which, and she saw, now, by the river, that the *which* was the entire question, and that no one had let her ask it, because to ask it was to notice that there were two doors, not one — the door that kept the knife from the child, which everyone would agree should stay shut; and the door that kept the *Custody's own nature* secret from the people it governed, which was a different door entirely, which was the door Mama Nneka had written about in the fragment, *the silence around the lock,* the debt incurred in the dark —

— and the Custody had built them into the same folio, the knife-door and the silence-door, three sections in one unmarked leather cover, so that you could not protect the one without protecting the other; so that saving the child and keeping the secret were, by the architecture's own deepest design, the same act; so that anyone who came, like Adaeze, with a keeper's heart, would protect the child and would therefore, without ever deciding to, also reseal the silence, forever, with the failsafe, in a way that could never be redone, *a body that can be reset twice is a body that will be reset incorrectly,* one deployment, only ever one, and it would be hers.

"Oh," Adaeze said. It was a very small sound by the wide bright river.

"Yes," said Hadiya. "Oh. I have wondered, this whole season, whether you had seen it. I think you had not, quite, let yourself. I think you have been holding two things in your two hands for weeks and not letting them touch because you

knew, you knew the whole time, that if they touched they would be one thing, and the one thing is unbearable, and so you kept them apart, the way she did, your grandmother, *I have built a thing I cannot justify and cannot abandon and I will spend the rest of my life pretending one of those is not true.* You are her granddaughter. You have been doing the family thing. You have been pretending one of them is not true."

The river went by. The willows put their hands in it.

"I am not going to tell you what to do," Hadiya said, and she stood, the way she had stood in the library, a person ending the conversation because she had said her thing and would not cheapen it by staying. "I told you I would ask you to do nothing and I have, and I meant it, and it is still my whole offer. But I will leave you with the real shape of it, since they would not, and someone should. They are not asking you to keep a knife from a child. They are asking you to be the one who decides, forever, with no take-backs, that eight billion people will never be told there is a hand holding a door shut over their heads — and to decide it in such a way that they, the keepers, never had to decide it, because you, the free woman, the keeper of otters, the one who walked to the river and could have not come back, chose it.

"That is what the failsafe is. It is not a lock. It is a confession with your signature on it and no one else's.

"And the worst of it — the thing I lie awake on — is that they might be *right*. They might be completely right. The daylight might be exactly as dangerous as they think, and the silence might be the price of the best world that has ever existed, and your grandmother might have been wise and not cowardly to sign the yes, and I might be the fool they will tell you I am. I do not think so. But I do not know. No one

knows.

"That is the whole of what I came to give you, the same as last time: that no one knows, that they will tell you they know and they do not, that she did not, that I do not, that the only honest person in this entire forty-year story will be you, in a room, with your hand on a folio, knowing that you do not know and doing it anyway or not doing it anyway. Be the honest one, Adaeze. However you choose. Just — be the one who knows she does not know. It is the only inheritance worth having. It is the one she actually left you. It was never the blood."

She settled her empty hands, that had no books and no tea, one inside the other.

"There is still no tea," she said, "and I am still sorry about it, and I am going to go now before I say something that performs. Thank you for coming to the river. Thank you for telling them you were coming; I know you did; I saw the woman in the grey coat not following you, three bridges up, being so very careful not to follow you, and it was the most eloquent thing she has ever not-said to me. Tell her — " she paused. "Tell her I said the not-following was well done. She will know what I mean. She is the best of them. That is not a comfort. The best of them is exactly who you should be most afraid of, because the best of them is the proof that good people can do this, and the proof that good people can do this is the thing that has let it be done for forty years. Goodbye, Adaeze. I hope I do not see you again. I mean that as the kindest thing I have. If I see you again it will be because something has gone wrong for one of us."

And she went, along the low bright bank, past the students with their feet in the water and the old couple and the man asleep over his book, a young woman with empty

hands, not hurrying, gone.

Adaeze sat on the bench by the river for a long time.

She did not do the latch on anything. She noticed that she did not. Her hands lay in her lap, empty, like Hadiya's had been, and she let them, and she looked at the river that did not know what day it was, and she understood that she had come to the river holding the Custody's gift — *we are asking you, we are leaving it to you, you are free* — as the heaviest kind thing anyone had ever done for her; and that she was leaving the river understanding that the gift and the theft were the same object, seen from two sides, the way the dome and the room were the same object, the way the knife-door and the silence-door were the same folio; that everything in this entire world she had fallen into was one thing wearing two faces, and that her grandmother had known it, and had not been able to bear it, and had pretended one face was not there, and had died still pretending, and had left her the pretending like a house with the damp coming through the wall on the side that faced the water.

The willows put their hands in the river.

After a while she got up, and walked back along the bank, and up through the city of pale stone, three bridges, past the place where a woman in a grey coat had been so careful not to follow her; and the woman was not there now, having trusted her, having gone back to let a form rest its required hours; and Adaeze walked back alone to the truest building in the world, under which there was one room, in which there was one folio, in which there were two doors the architecture had welded into one, and she did not yet know what she would do, and for the first time in the whole season she understood that not-knowing was not a thing that was going to resolve.

It was the inheritance.

It was the only one that had ever been real.

She went in by the south door, to where they were waiting, so gently, so honestly, so freely, to let her decide.

Chapter Sixteen

Therèse, Unhoused

She could not sleep, in the guest room with the fig tree, which was the same guest room with the same fig tree and the same three pigeons on the rim of the same unused fountain, and which had been, the first night she spent in it, the room in which she had read her grandmother's note and decided nothing and woken to find the decision made for her by her own hand. She had slept badly then too. The room seemed to be for that. It was a room you came to in order to not sleep while a thing was being decided one floor of yourself below the floor you could reach.

So a little after midnight she got up, and put the cardigan on over the clothes she had not changed out of, and went to find water, because her mouth was dry and because the body, when the mind will not lie down, sends it on errands.

There was a small kitchen at the end of the residential corridor — the Custody kept a handful of plain rooms here, off the antechamber level, for officers who were in the city for a matter and would, when the matter was done, go home to wherever they kept the rooms they did not live in; she had worked this out over the last days; they were a whole order of people who owned, somewhere, a flat with a rosemary plant they did not water, and lived, really, in rooms like these, near the work, between the work, for the work — and the kitchen had a light on.

Therèse was at the stove.

She had her back to the door. She had taken off the grey coat — it hung on the back of a chair, and without it she was smaller, an ordinary woman of sixty in a grey jumper and grey trousers, which Adaeze understood, seeing them, were not a uniform but only what was under the coat, the same grey all the way down, a person who had chosen, a long time ago, to be the colour of a thing that did not insist on being noticed — and she was stirring a pot, slowly, with a wooden spoon, and on the counter beside her were the ends and peelings of vegetables, an onion's papery skin, the green tops of carrots, a few stalks, the honest debris of someone making, from very little, at midnight, soup.

"I could not sleep either," Therèse said, without turning. "There is enough for two. There is always, when I make it, enough for more than one, which is a thing my sister used to say about me, that I cooked as though I expected company I never invited. Sit. It is nearly ready. It is not a good soup. It is a true soup. There is a difference, and you have learned, this season, to taste it."

Adaeze sat at the small table.

She watched Therèse's back, the slow stirring, the steam. She had come looking for water and had found, instead, the thing she had not let herself go looking for, which was Therèse at midnight with her coat on a chair; and she knew, sitting down, that she was going to say the thing she had carried back from the river, because the room was small and the hour was late and there was soup, and these were the conditions under which the true things got said; she had learned that too, this season.

"I know what the failsafe is," Adaeze said.

The stirring did not stop. That was the first thing. The stirring did not stop, and did not speed, and did not falter;

the wooden spoon went round in the pot at exactly the pace it had been going; and only after a moment, into the steam, Therèse said: "Tell me what you know."

"It's two doors," Adaeze said. "I'd been thinking it was one. You let me think it was one. The knife and the — the thing that keeps the knife from the child, I thought they were the same door, I thought the recipe was the knife or was next to the knife, and I would be keeping the knife from the child, that's how you let it sit in me, that's how Henri put his body in the doorway, *for the child*. But it isn't the knife. It's the hand. The thing in the folio is how *you* work. How the Custody keeps saying no. It's the door that keeps the knife out, yes, that's one of them, but it's welded to the other one, the one that keeps — everyone — from ever knowing the first one is there. The silence one. My grandmother wrote about it. *The silence around the lock*. You built them into one cover so that nobody could ever protect the child without also — without sealing the silence. Forever. With one signature. And you've arranged it — " her voice did the thing; she let it " — you've arranged it so the signature is mine."

Therèse turned off the flame under the pot.

She did it carefully, the blue ring of it dying down, and she set the wooden spoon across the top of the pot, and she got two bowls down from a shelf, and she ladled the soup into them, slowly, evenly, more into Adaeze's than her own, and she carried them to the table and set one in front of Adaeze and one at her own place, and she sat down, and she folded her hands in front of her bowl, and she did not pick up her spoon, and she looked at Adaeze across the steam.

"Yes," she said.

That was all. *Yes*. Not a flinch, not a defense, not a softening, not the careful procedural sentence Adaeze had

braced for, the one that would make it permitted, proportionate, necessary. Just the word. The same word Hadiya had said she would weaponize. The whole terrible weapon of them, laid on the table next to the soup: *yes, that is true, I will not lie to you about it, do with the truth what you can.*

"You're not going to tell me I have it wrong," Adaeze said.

"You do not have it wrong," Therèse said. "You have it exactly right, and you have it more clearly than I have ever let myself have it, because you have come to it fresh, in a season, and I have come to it over thirty years, and a thing you come to over thirty years you can hold without ever once looking at it directly, the way you can carry a stone in your shoe a long way if you put your weight just so. You have made me look at it directly. I am grateful. I think. I am not sure gratitude is the word for a thing that hurts this much, but I do not have a better one at midnight."

"How do you live with it."

"You keep asking me that," Therèse said, "in different words, and I keep giving you different answers, and they are all true and none of them is the answer, because there is no answer, there is only the living with it, which is not a thing you do once and have done; it is a thing you do every day, the way you fed the otters every day; it is not a position you arrive at, it is a chore you perform." She picked up her spoon, finally, and did not eat, only held it. "But I will tell you the thing I have not told you, since you have told me the thing I did not tell you, and it is only fair, and it is the only currency I have ever found that buys anything real, which is the truth, even when it costs me. You asked how I live with it. I will tell you what it has cost to live with it. Then you will know the price, and you can decide whether it is a price you

are willing to watch yourself pay, because that — not the argument, not the folio, not your clever Hadiya by her river — that is the real question in front of you, and no one has put it to you plainly, and I am going to, because I would rather you be horrified by the truth than seduced by the gentleness. Eat your soup. It is better hot, even though it is not good."

Adaeze ate the soup. It was not good. It was true. She had learned to taste the difference.

"I have a sister," Therèse said.

"You've never said."

"No. I have a sister. Her name is Margriet. She is four years younger than me. We grew up — it does not matter where; a flat country; you have seen the country, we went through the edge of it on the train to the poet; the cows in the standing water. We grew up there. Our parents kept a little land.

"And Margriet, from when she was small, was a — she was like you. She was a keeper. She could not pass a hurt thing. She brought home birds with broken wings and a fox cub once that bit everyone and a dog that no one wanted because it was old and shook, and she kept it, she kept all of them, she was the one who sat up with the dying ones so they would not die alone, at nine years old, at eleven; my parents thought it was a phase and it was not a phase, it was her, it was the deepest fact about her, the way keeping is the deepest fact about you, I knew it the first morning at your gate, I thought, *oh, she is a Margriet, this one,* and it is why I —"

She stopped. She turned the spoon over.

"She runs a place now. In the country we grew up in. A place for old dogs. The ones the shelters cannot home because no one adopts a dog that has two years left and

arthritis and bad breath. She takes them. She lets them be warm and fed and loved for the years they have and she sits up with them at the end so they do not die alone. She has done it for thirty years. It is the best life I know of. It is a better life than mine. I want you to understand that I think that. My sister's life is better than my life, plainly, by any measure I can find, and she made it out of exactly the thing you are made of, and I love her past my ability to say it."

"And you don't speak."

"We have not spoken in nine years," Therèse said.

She set the spoon down.

"It was not a fight. I want to be exact, because the not-exactness is the whole of the grief. There was no fight. There was no day. People imagine estrangement is a door slammed and it is not, it is a door that is never quite opened, over and over, until the not-opening becomes the permanent shape of the thing. I took this work when I was thirty. I could not tell her what it was. I cannot — you understand this now better than almost anyone alive — I could not tell her what it was, and the work is not a thing you can do half-told, it is not a job you can describe in the shape of its silhouette and leave the inside dark; the silhouette itself is a lie, *I work in public health, I work in a kind of records office, I travel for committees* — and Margriet, who is not stupid, who is the furthest thing from stupid, who reads a hurt creature across a yard, heard the lie in it the way your Iyanna heard the lie in your *training*. She heard it. And she did the thing one does, she asked, gently, and then less gently, and I gave her the silhouette, again, the records office, the committees, and she stopped believing it, and she did not stop loving me, she stopped *trusting* me, which is different and worse, because you can love a person you have decided is lying to you, you

just cannot any longer be known by them, and being known by them is the only thing that love was ever for."

The soup steamed between them. The small kitchen hummed with the small sounds a building makes at midnight, the pipes, the far-off settling.

"She thinks," Therèse said, "that I became cold. That is the story she has, because it is the only story the facts allow her, the facts she is permitted to have. She thinks her sister went away into some grey official life and got smaller and colder and more careful and stopped calling, stopped coming, stopped being the girl who — I was not always like this; I want you to know that; the coat is not a thing I was born in; there was a Therèse who was loud, if you can believe it, who laughed in a way that — and Margriet watched that Therèse disappear into a coat, year by year, and was never told why, and could only conclude that I had chosen the coat over her, that I had decided that committees mattered more than my sister and her old dogs, that I had become a person who preferred the records office to the people in it."

She stirred the soup that did not need stirring; it was already made; her hand only wanted something to do.

"And the unbearable thing, the thing I cannot — the thing I came down here at midnight to make soup about, if I am honest, because the procedure-form is resting its required hours and my hands needed — the unbearable thing is that she is *right*. I did choose it. I chose this over her. Not in a day. In ten thousand small not-openings.

"I chose to be the wall in the doorway. I chose to carry the thing so that someone would, so that it would be carried by a person who knew its weight and would not, therefore, ever set it down lightly — and the price was Margriet, was being known, was the only thing love is for, and I paid it, I am still

paying it, I pay it every single day that I do not get on a train to the flat country and walk up the lane to the place with the old dogs and say *Margriet, I am going to tell you what I actually do, sit down* — which I will never do, which I can never do, because to tell her would be to put it in her, the furniture, the weight, and she is the one person in the world I became this in order to keep it away from."

Adaeze sat very still.

"That's Iyanna," she said. "That's — you're describing —"

"I am describing your next thirty years," Therèse said, gently, terribly, "if you let it be. Yes. That is why I am telling you. Not to make you pity me; pity is cheap and I do not want it and it would insult us both. I am telling you because you asked how I live with it, and the answer is *Margriet,* the answer is that living with it is exactly the size and shape of a sister you can no longer be known by, and you have a sister, and you are already, this season, three lies into the same coat I have spent thirty years inside, and I have watched you put it on, the way it goes on, one true-thing-not-said at a time, and I would be a monster — I am many things; I am, by your river-woman's lights, the most dangerous kind of person there is, a good one who does this; but I would be a *monster* — if I let you walk toward the folio believing that the cost is the eight billion who will never know, the abstract ones, the dome, the child in the raincoat.

"That is not the cost you will feel. You will not feel the eight billion. No one can feel eight billion. You will feel Iyanna. The cost is always, only, exactly one person, and you already know which one, and she is in a house by a lagoon keeping a promise about a box she does not understand because you asked her to, and she is the price, and I will not let you not know that before you decide. There. Now you

know what I know. It is the worst thing I have. I have given it to you with the soup."

Adaeze found that she was crying, without having decided to, the quiet kind, the kind that is just water and no sound, and she let it, and Therèse did not reach across the table, did not touch her, did not do any of the things a lesser kindness would have done; she only sat with her, in the kitchen, with the true soup going cool now between them, and let her have it, the way she let everyone have everything, which was the whole of her terrible gentleness, the not-reaching, the leaving-be, the respect that was indistinguishable, at this depth, from solitude.

"Why do you do it," Adaeze said, at last. "If it costs — if it cost you Margriet. Why you. Why did you stay thirty years. You could have left. Davor left. You could have gone to the flat country and the old dogs and been — known. Why you."

Therèse was quiet for a long time.

"Because I do not believe anyone else should have to," she said.

She turned her bowl a quarter-turn on the table, the way she turned postcards, the way she squared forms.

"That is the whole of it, and it is not noble, I want to be clear that it is not noble, it is closer to a kind of arrogance, or a kind of cowardice wearing arrogance's coat, I have never been able to decide which. When I understood what the work was — when I was young, and they showed me, the way I have shown you, the cellar, the folders, the weight — I understood that someone was going to carry it. It was not going to be carried by no one. The world that I love, the world with Margriet's old dogs in it and the child in the raincoat and the fig bun and your otters, that world sits on top of this, on top of the room, on top of someone in a

doorway, and the someone is not optional, the someone is the price, and I looked around at the someones available and I thought — and this is the arrogance, or the cowardice — I thought, *I can carry it without it turning me into the thing we are afraid of. I think I can. I am not sure anyone can, but I think I am as likely as any of them, and more likely than most, and if it is going to be carried by someone it should be carried by someone who will hate carrying it every day, because the day it is carried by someone who does not hate it, that is the day it becomes what Hadiya says it already is.* So I stayed. To keep the seat warm so that a worse person could not have it."

The soup had stopped steaming. It had gone, at that hour, from hot to barely warm, a skin starting on its surface, and neither of them had done more than begin it.

"That is the reason. It is the only reason I have ever found that survives contact with the cellar. It is not a good reason. It is the reason I have.

"I do not believe anyone else should have to, and so I do, and it cost me my sister, and I would — God help me, this is the truest and worst thing — I would do it again. I have asked myself, in this kitchen, more nights than I will tell you, whether I would do it again, and the answer is always yes, and the yes is the thing I cannot forgive myself, the yes is my Brigitta's-heel, the yes is the small flat sound my own life makes when I set it down on the stone."

She picked up her spoon and ate, finally, three or four spoonfuls of the cooling soup, mechanically, the way a person eats who has remembered that the body must be kept going regardless of what the rest of them is doing; and Adaeze ate too, and for a while they only ate, two keepers at a small table at one in the morning, one of them thirty years

in and one of them a season in, eating a true soup that was not good.

"I'm going to be asked to decide," Adaeze said. "In a few days. When the procedure finishes. You're going to ask me."

"Yes."

"And you've just spent — you've just made me soup and told me about Margriet so that I would — what. So that I'd say yes? So that I'd say no? Which one is this for? Because I can't tell, that's the thing, I genuinely can't tell whether you've just made the most powerful possible case for me to use it — *be the wall, carry it, it's worth a sister* — or the most powerful possible case for me to refuse — *look what it cost me, don't, run, keep Iyanna* — and I think you don't know either, I think you'd made the soup before you knew which —"

"I do not know which," Therèse said. "I swear it to you on the only thing I have left to swear on, which is Margriet, whom I will not see again: I do not know which.

"I did not tell you about my sister to move you toward the door or away from it. I told you because you are about to make a decision that I made, in pieces, over thirty years, without ever once being allowed to see it whole, and you are being made to see it whole, in a season, which is crueler and also — also more honest, also the first honest version of this that has ever existed, because you are the first one who was brought in from outside, the first one we did not grow ourselves, the first one who can still smell the lagoon — and I could not let you decide it without knowing the one thing I know that the folio does not contain, which is what it does to a sister. That is not an argument for yes or for no. It is the missing page."

She turned her empty bowl a quarter-turn on the table, squaring it to an edge only she could see.

"They gave you the architecture and the failsafe and they did not give you the page about the sister, because they did not keep it, the same as they did not keep your grandmother's doubts, because the sister is not dangerous, the sister is only the entire actual cost. So I gave it to you. From me. Off the record. There is no form for it. It is the one thing I have ever done in thirty years that is not in any record anywhere, and I did it at midnight, with soup, for you, and I do not know if it was a kindness or the cruelest thing I have ever done, and that — " the smallest breath of something that was almost the thing her face did " — that not-knowing, I think you will find, is the family business. You have married into it. Your grandmother. Hadiya. Me. We are all of us people who did the enormous thing without knowing, and told ourselves the not-knowing was honesty, and maybe it was, and maybe it was only the most bearable available shape of being unforgivable."

The soup was finished. The bowls sat empty. Outside, in the courtyard, one of the three pigeons made the small private sound a pigeon makes in its sleep, and was answered by another, and was quiet.

"On the platform," Adaeze said. "The first time. You said you'd miss me. You looked surprised you'd said it."

"I was surprised."

"Why did you say it."

Therèse looked at the empty bowl, and turned it the last quarter-turn, so that it sat squared to the edge of the table, the way everything she touched ended up squared to something, as though the whole of her thirty years had been a long attempt to make at least the small things line up, since

the large ones never would.

"Because I knew, by then, that you were a Margriet," she said. "And I had spent nine years not being allowed to miss the one I had. And there you were, at a gate, with your otters and your latching and your sister you were already failing to call, and I thought — I let myself think, for the length of a platform — *here is one more keeper, and this time I am allowed to know her, this time the work is the thing that lets me near her instead of the thing that takes her away* — and I said the true thing before I could stop it, which I almost never do, which is the whole of what your coming has done to me, Adaeze, you have made me, twice now, say the true thing before I could square it first.

"It is the most reckless I have been in thirty years. I will miss you. I said it because it was true then and it is truer now, because in a few days I am going to ask you to do a thing, or watch you decide not to, and either way you will go home to your lagoon and your sister and your otters, you will not stay, you are not ours, you were never going to be ours, the failsafe will not work on someone who could be ours — and I will go back to the rooms I do not live in, and the coat, and the kettle, and Margriet's silence, and I will miss you, the way I have not let myself miss anyone since I chose this, and it will be, I think, good for me, the missing.

"It will be a way the work has not yet made me pay. I find I almost look forward to it. It will mean I was, for one season, near a keeper, and let myself know her, and that is more than I have had in nine years, and I will take the grief of it gladly, because grief you have chosen is the last freedom they cannot procedure out of you.

"Your grandmother knew that. It is in the doubt-letter your Hadiya gave you, if you read it again, underneath. *We*

are incurring it in the dark. The dark is where they make you do it. But the grief — the grief you carry into the dark on purpose, the sister you choose to miss — that is the one lamp they never thought to take, because it does not light anything, it only proves you are still the kind of thing that can be in the dark and know it is dark."

Somewhere in the building a pipe shifted and knocked, once, and went still, and the kitchen was very quiet again.

"Go to bed, Adaeze. The soup is done. You will not sleep, but go to bed; the not-sleeping is better lying down; I learned that here, in these rooms, a long time ago. Thank you for the soup. I know I made it. Thank you anyway. It is a thing we say, in my family, the one I cannot speak to. We thank each other for the meal the other one cooked. It is a way of saying *I would have cooked it for you*. I would have. Good night."

And Adaeze stood, and took the two empty bowls to the small sink, because her hands needed a thing, and washed them, both, and the wooden spoon, and the pot, and set them in the rack to dry; and Therèse let her, sitting at the table in her grey, the coat still on the chair, an ordinary unhoused woman of sixty at one in the morning who had just given away, off the record, the only thing she had never given anyone; and when Adaeze had finished and dried her hands she stood for a moment behind Therèse's chair, and did not touch her — she had learned that too, the not-touching, the leaving-be — and said only, "Good night, Therèse," and went back down the residential corridor to the guest room with the fig tree, where she did not sleep, lying down, which was better; and somewhere below her, one floor of herself she could not reach, the decision went on making itself, or waiting to be made, she could no longer tell

the difference, and she was not sure, anymore, that there was one.

Chapter Seventeen

The Letter the Grandmother Left

On the eighth day Henri sent for her.

He could not, the message said — it came by way of a young officer Adaeze did not know, who delivered it with the grave care of someone entrusted above his rank — he could not come to her, for obvious reasons, and he would not, he wished it understood, presume to summon her, a summons being a thing he had no standing to issue and would not issue even if he had; but if she found she had an hour, on this the day before the day, and if she wished to spend any part of it in an ordinary hospital with an old man who would not be very good company, there was a thing he had kept a long time that he believed was now hers, and that he would rather put into her hands himself than have carried to her by another, if she would allow him the — the word the young officer used, plainly, having clearly been given it to use, was *honour*.

She went.

The hospital was the same ordinary hospital, the one where ordinary people were born and mended and died, and the corridor was the same corridor in which she had sat with the cold tea on the worst night, and Henri was in a room off it with a window that looked onto a car park and a strip of plane trees and, beyond them, if you knew to look, the low pale shoulder of the Repository, which you could see from

here, which he had positioned himself in the bed to see, or someone had positioned him, so that the old man could lie in his ordinary hospital bed and look, all day, at the thing he had put his body in front of.

She understood, looking from the window to his face, what the positioning meant. Henri was seeing the dome from the outside, for the first time in forty years. He had spent his life inside it, being its wall; and now he lay among ordinary mending people and looked at the pale shoulder of it the way they looked at it — from far off, one of the protected at last — and she could not tell whether that was the cruelest mercy the floor had done him or the only rest he had ever been given. She suspected Henri, who arranged what he could, had arranged to have it both ways.

He was much reduced. That was the first thing. The tall man was a small shape under a blanket, his head bound, one side of his face the colours a face goes, the white hair shaved away on the bound side so that he looked lopsided, half-shorn, like a field after a strange harvest. But his eyes, when they found her, were Henri's eyes, and the very small warmth she had learned to read was in them, turned up, as far as he could turn it.

Around him the room held the ordinary apparatus of an ordinary ward: a monitor keeping its green vigil in the corner, a line taped into the back of the hand that did not work, a jug of water sweating on the tray. It smelled of antiseptic and of the institutional soup of somewhere down the hall, and under that, faintly, of a body mending slowly. A television laughed at itself in another room. A trolley went by on a wheel that wanted oil. None of it knew that the man in the bed had been, for forty years, the only wall a secret building had; the machines kept their watch over him with

precisely the comprehension he had kept over the door, which was none, which was only the task.

"Madam Okonkwo," he said. His voice was a thread. "You came back. You are always coming back. It is the most hopeful thing about you. I have decided to treat it as a sign, though I know better than to read signs."

"Henri." She drew the chair to the bed. "You shouldn't talk. I can sit. I'm good at sitting. I've had a season of practice."

"I will talk a little," he said, "and then I will stop, and you will read, and I will rest, and it will be the best hour I have had since the floor. Sit. There is water there; I cannot reach it; I would be grateful. The reaching is the thing that is gone, mostly. I can think. I cannot reach. It is, when you consider what I did for a living, a joke of a very dry kind."

She gave him water, holding the cup, the straw, the small indignity of it borne by both of them without remark.

"I have held a thing for your grandmother for forty years," Henri said, when he had drunk. "Several things. You have had two of them. The note, in the room, the first night — that was the first. The fragment your — the young woman gave you; that one I did not give you; that one took another road, and I have thoughts about the road, and they are not for today. But the ones I hold, the ones Perpetua lodged with us, with me, because I was the young one then, I was the one who would outlive the others, that was the whole of why she chose me, she said, *Henri, you have the terrible gift of not dying, I am going to make it useful* — the last of those, the one she marked for this, for exactly this, for the hand of her blood on the day before the choice, I have kept in a place only I know, for forty years, and I had thought, lying here, that I had perhaps left it too late, that the floor had nearly

made a liar of me to a dead woman, which would have been — " the thread of his voice caught " — which would have been the only promise I have ever failed to keep, and I find I minded it, these last days, more than I minded the floor. So I had it brought. It is there. In the drawer. Under the — yes. That. It is yours. She wrote it for you. Not for you by name; she did not know your name; but for you by the only thing that turned out to matter, which was that you would be the one sitting where you are sitting, on the day before the day, having seen what you have now seen. She knew you would have seen it. That was the one thing she was sure of. *Whoever it is,* she said, *they will have worked out what it really is by the time they read this, or they are no granddaughter of mine.*"

Adaeze took the envelope out of the drawer.

It was older than the other two — the paper had the faint foxing of forty years, the ink gone from black to the brown-black of old ink — and it was thicker, several pages, and on the front, in the right-tilted self-taught hand she now knew better than she knew most living hands, it said only: *For the one who is tired, and alone, and has understood.*

"I'll leave you to rest," she said. "I'll read it outside."

"You will read it here," Henri said, with the very last of his strength put into the small flat authority of it, the authority of the wall in the doorway, "if you will indulge a dying man's — I am not dying, the doctors are very firm that I am not dying, but it is the kind of phrase that gets one's way and I have so few left — you will read it here, beside me, because I have carried it for forty years and I would like, at the end of the carrying, to be in the room when it is set down. I will not look at it. I do not know what is in it. I have never known. I would only like to be here. It is the last of the work I will do.

Let me do it. Then I will sleep, and you will go and decide the thing, and whatever you decide I will have been, for one hour, the man who got it to you in time. It is enough. It is more than most of us get. Read, Adaeze. I will watch the Repository. You read."

So she read, in the chair, by the bed, while an old man watched a pale dome through a window and was, for an hour, in the room.

*

Child —

I have written you twice before this and I will not write you again, so let me waste nothing.

You will have understood by now that it is two doors. I know you will have, because I built it so that you would have to, eventually, if you were paying attention, and you are mine, and we pay attention; it is our gift and our affliction; your mother had it and could not bear it and turned it on small things, on the exact green of a paint, on the precise fault in a roof, because the large things it showed her were unendurable; I do not blame her; I gave it to her; I have given it to you. So. You know. The folio is two doors welded shut as one. The knife-door, which I would build again tomorrow, which I am not sorry for, which keeps the worst thing out of the worst hands and has done for forty years and the proof is that you have never heard the name of the thing it keeps out, the proof is the silence, the proof is that the world is, by every measure, kinder than the world I was born into, and the door is part of why. I am not going to pretend to you that the door is a tragedy. The door is good. I want that said plainly, on this page, by me,

because everyone who comes after me will want to make me a tragic figure, a woman who built a cage and wept, and I did weep, but not because the cage was wrong. The cage is right. Hold onto that. Whatever else I tell you, the cage is right.

It is the second door I could not get right. The silence-door. The one that keeps the world from knowing the first door is there. I argued, at the time — I was the one who argued it, child, it was me, I will not hide behind the others — I argued that you cannot have the first door without the second; that a door everyone knows about is a door everyone will eventually vote to open, in a bad year, in a frightened decade, and that the only way to keep the knife from the child forever was to keep even the knowledge of the door from the child's parents, so that no generation could ever be talked into opening what no generation knew was shut. I argued it well. I believe I was right. I have never stopped believing I was right.

And I have never stopped knowing that being right did not make it permitted.

That is the thing I could not get past, the thing I have carried into whatever I am now, writing to you from inside the ground: that we did a thing to eight billion people that we did not ask them about and could not ask them about, because the asking would have undone it, and that no quantity of being right about it discharges the fact that it was done to them in the dark, by us, on their behalf, without their knowing. There is a debt. I wrote that to Felicity once; she wrote back that I was being sentimental, that a debt no one can collect is not a debt, it is a feeling; and Felicity was cleverer than me and I think she was wrong about that and I think it is the only important thing

she was ever wrong about. There is a debt. It does not stop being a debt because the creditor will never know to collect it. It may, in fact, be the purest kind of debt there is — the kind owed to people who will never know you owe it, which you carry not because they can make you but because you are the kind of thing that carries.

Now. The failsafe. The reason it is keyed to one of mine, and the reason it is keyed to one of mine who walks in not knowing, which everyone treated as a security measure and which was not, or not only, which was the one thing in the whole architecture that was mine alone, that I put in and would not take out, that I threatened to refuse the entire work over, and they let me have it because they thought it was a harmless sentimentality of an old woman and it was not harmless and it was not sentimental and I am going to tell you what it actually was, because you are the one it was for, and you should not deploy it or refuse it without knowing what I was doing when I made it.

I did not get to choose freely. That is the thing. I want you to understand that I, who built this, never once got to make the choice you are about to make. By the time the choice existed, I was inside it; I knew too much; I was compromised; every cell of me was an interested party. An insider cannot choose about the door, child, because an insider is the door; I could no more freely decide whether the Custody should exist than my hand can freely decide whether my arm should. I had given up my freedom to the work the day I understood the work, which is the day they show you the cellar, which they will have shown you by now — the folders, the poet, the ones we watched. After the cellar you are not free anymore. You are ours. You decide for the door because you are the door.

So I made one free person.

That is the failsafe. That is the whole of what it is, underneath the machinery. I reached forty years down the line of my own blood and I made one person who would come to the door from outside, clean, with the lagoon still on her, not ours, not compromised, not an interested party — and I gave her, and only her, in all the forty years, in all the thousands of us who have served and decided and carried, the one thing none of the rest of us ever had: a free choice about the door. Made by someone the cellar has not yet bought. Made by someone who could walk to a river and not come back. I could not give the world a vote; the vote would undo it; I have told you, the second door cannot be opened a little. But I could give it one voter. One. You. I spent the last clear years of my life building, into the deepest part of a machine meant to take choices away from everyone forever, a single irreducible choice, for a single free person, once. It is the most expensive thing anyone has ever made. It cost forty years and four lives and a debt that cannot be paid and a granddaughter I never met sitting in a chair beside a hurt man with this page in her hands. It is my whole life's work and it is not the door. The door was the others' work too. This — the one free choice — is mine. It is the only thing in the folio that is only mine.

And here is why I will not tell you what to choose, and why you must not look for it on this page or any other, and why, if you find yourself hunting these lines for my permission, for my instruction, for the dead woman's hand on your shoulder turning you toward the door or away from it, you must stop, and put the page down, and understand that its absence is the gift:

If I tell you what to choose, I un-make the one free choice I spent my life making. If you do it because I said to, or refuse it because I said to, then you are not free, you are obeying, and obedience is just the cellar reaching you from inside your own grandmother, and the whole forty years collapses into nothing, into one more person doing the enormous thing because someone they trusted told them to. I did not build a free choice in order to fill it, at the last moment, with my own preference. That would be the cruelest possible joke and I have made enough cruel jokes. I am not going to tell you whether to reseal the silence forever and keep the world exactly as good and exactly as unfree as it is, or to let it be known, and risk everything, and pay out the debt in the only coin that was ever real, which is the truth, handed to people who may not be ready for it and may do something terrible with it and may also, finally, get to decide their own lives. I do not know which is right. I want to be the one person who is allowed to say that to you without it being a strategy: I do not know. I built the whole thing and I do not know. I have had forty years and the grave and I do not know. If I knew, I would not have needed you. You exist because I did not know. You are the question I could not answer, given hands, and a heart, and a sister, and a lagoon.

One last thing, and then I will let you go to it.

You will want, when you decide, for it to be clean. It will not be clean. Whichever you choose, you will spend the rest of your life not knowing if it was right, the way I have spent mine, the way Felicity did, and Cyprian, and even Hippolytus who pretended to certainties he did not have. That not-knowing is not a punishment and it is not a failure of nerve. It is the actual shape of the actual thing. Anyone

who offers you a version of this in which you get to be sure afterward is selling you something, on either side, the keepers or the openers, both of them will offer you certainty and both of them are lying, because the truth is that this is a real choice, and real choices are the ones you cannot ever fully justify, and the mark of a real choice honestly made is that it leaves a wound that does not close. I have the wound. I am giving you, I am afraid, the chance at your own. It is the worst inheritance and the only real one. The blood was never the inheritance, child. The freedom is. I am so sorry. I am so proud. I could not give you an answer. I gave you the question, clean, which is the only thing I had that was worth forty years, and I gave it to you because I loved a person I would never meet more than I loved being right, which is the one decent thing I managed, at the end, after all the cleverness, and it is enough, it has to be enough, it is what there is.

Decide, and be the one who knows she does not know, and come what may.

— Nneka. Perpetua. Your grandmother. The woman who baked too much bread, and taught your mother to drive on the Onitsha road, and built a cage she would build again, and one door inside it she could never close, and one free choice she could never make, and gave the choice to you, because someone should get to be free about it, once, and she decided it should be the one she loved.

*

Adaeze sat with the pages in her lap for a long time.

The room was very quiet. The machines that watched Henri made their small regular sounds. Outside the window

the plane trees moved in a wind she could not hear, and beyond them the pale dome sat low against the city, true, holding, the dome that was true because of the room, the room that held two doors, the doors her grandmother could not pry apart and had spent her death's-worth of forethought making sure Adaeze would have to.

She looked at Henri.

He had, at some point in her reading, fallen asleep — the real sleep of the badly hurt, sudden and total — with his face turned toward the window, toward the dome, the small warmth in his closed eyes gone slack, an old man who had kept a promise to a dead woman in time, by an hour, by the breadth of a floor he had not quite been killed on. His hand lay open on the blanket, the reaching hand, the one that did not work anymore. She did not take it; he would not have wanted the taking; she had learned the not-touching from the best teacher of it she had ever met. But she set, very lightly, on the open palm, two fingers — top, bottom, two fingers, the gate — not waking him, only resting them there for the length of three slow breaths, the way she had touched a gate-post on the wrong side, in another country, a lifetime ago, saying goodbye to an otter; and Henri did not wake, and the dome held, and the wind moved the trees she could not hear.

Then she folded her grandmother's pages, the third document and the last, and she did not put it inside her cardigan with the other two, over her heart, because it was too thick, and because — she understood this as she did it — it did not belong over the heart with the note and the letter and the doubt; those were things she was carrying; this was a thing that had been set down. The carrying was over. Her grandmother had carried it forty years and had, with this, set

it down, into Adaeze's hands, and the setting-down was the whole point, was the gift, was the freedom: *I am not going to carry this the last step for you. The last step is yours. It is the only step that was ever yours. Take it free.*

She put the pages in the inside pocket of the cardigan anyway, folded once more to fit, against the place where her heart was, because she was, in the end, her grandmother's, and her grandmother had baked too much bread and cooked for company she never invited and kept things close that she had been told to let go, and some inheritances you cannot refuse because they are not in the blood, they are in the hands, in what the hands do before the mind decides.

She stood. She looked once more at Henri, asleep, facing the dome, the kept promise finally set down out of him too, lighter, she hoped, by an hour; and she went out, past the machines and the window and the strip of plane trees, into the ordinary corridor, into the ordinary city, into the day before the day.

Tomorrow they would ask her.

She walked back toward the pale dome through the warm afternoon, in no hurry, a woman with four papers over her heart and one free choice in front of her and a grandmother's voice in her ears saying *I do not know, I do not know, I built the whole thing and I do not know,* which was not comfort, and was not instruction, and was, she was beginning to understand, the only honest thing anyone had said to her in the whole season, said now by the one person who had earned the right to say it, forty years dead, reaching up through the ground with both empty hands to give her granddaughter the one thing she had: nothing. The clean question. The wound that does not close. The freedom.

She went in by the south door, to where they were waiting, to sleep one more night in the room with the fig tree, where she would not sleep, which was better lying down; and in the morning they would, so gently, so honestly, ask her to decide; and she did not know what she would say; and for the first time the not-knowing did not feel like a thing that had not yet resolved.

It felt like the thing itself. It felt like the inheritance. It felt, almost — she turned the word over, in the dome, under the high light, and found it fit, and did not flinch from it — it felt almost like being free.

Part Three

The Choice

She uses the failsafe. She becomes part of what she changed. She does not tell us what she chose.

Chapter Eighteen

The Race

They did not, in the end, ask her on the ninth day.

She had braced for it — had lain awake in the room with the fig tree bracing for it, had come down in the morning with her face arranged for it — and instead Therèse met her at the foot of the stairs with the grey coat already on and the particular stillness that meant the ground had moved in the night, and said: "The procedure is suspended. Not stopped. Suspended. Eva is coming from Brussels on the first train. Something has happened that changes the shape of the days, and I will not tell it to you twice, so I will tell it when she is here, and until then I am going to ask you to eat something, because I do not think any of us is going to eat well later."

Eva came a little before noon, with rain on the shoulders of a coat that was not grey but was, Adaeze noticed, becoming grey, the way they all seemed to, eventually, as though the work leached the colour out at the edges. She had a thin folder, and she had a face Adaeze had not seen on her, and she set the folder on the table in the small office off the antechamber level, where Therèse and André and Henri's deputy — a quiet woman called Saskia who had been carrying the central work since the floor — were waiting, and she did not sit.

"I went to see Davor," Eva said. "Three days ago. You sent me; it was on the list; the slip through his letter slot, the forged hand, we wanted to know what he could tell us about

it, which we assumed was nothing. I went on the morning train. I sat in his back room and he made the tea, two spoonfuls, the way he does, and we talked about the slip, and he could tell me nothing about it that he had not already told you, which was what I expected. And then, because he is Davor, and because we were, once, friends, and because he is the only person left alive outside this work who knew the four of them, he told me a thing I had not gone there for, and it is the thing, and I have been three days confirming it before I would say it aloud, and I have confirmed it."

"Say it," Therèse said.

"There are two of them," Eva said. "Two leaks. Two roads. We have been treating it as one, and it is two, and the two are not connected, and that is the whole of why we could not make the shape come out right."

She opened the thin folder. There was not much in it. There was never, Adaeze had learned, much in the folders that mattered.

"The first road," Eva said, "is the one we know. The re-derivers — the ones at the Repository, the ones with the preprint, Hadiya's people and the harder people behind them — they have been reconstructing the architecture from public traces, the way we always knew they could, the way the failsafe was built to answer. That is the road with the clock on it. That is the eleven days, now nine, now — now two. That road is real and it is closing and the failsafe answers it. Nothing I learned changes that road."

"And the second," Therèse said.

"The second road," Eva said, "is Davor."

The room went very still.

"Not — " Eva lifted a hand. "Not the way you are about to think it. He is not one of them. I would stake the work on it; I

did stake the work on it; I went and I sat with him and I know him and he is not one of them. But listen. Forty years ago Davor was the clerk. He has told us this; he told Adaeze this; *I made the notes, I made the tea, I was at the back of the room*. We heard *clerk* and we heard *harmless,* because that is what clerk means to people who have never been one. But think about what a clerk is. A clerk is the person who makes the notes."

"Notes of what," André said. Not quite a question.

"For two years, while the four of them built the thing, Davor sat at the back of the room and made the notes — not the architecture, he never understood the architecture, he says so and I believe him — but the *human* notes. Who argued what. Who doubted. The code names. The mark. Felicity's garden and Cyprian's bad chest and Hippolytus's certainties and Perpetua's no, her no on the small page, all of it, the whole human surround of the thing, forty years of it began in a young clerk's notebooks, and when he left, fifteen years ago, he did not burn them, because they were not the architecture, they were only — he thought — old human paper, the kind a person keeps."

"Where are the notebooks," Therèse said. Her voice had gone very flat.

"That is what I spent three days confirming," Eva said. "They are not at the press. He looked, while I sat there; he went pale; he is not a man who goes pale. They are not at the press. He gave them away. Eleven years ago."

"To whom," Thérèse said. The flatness had come back into her voice, the flatness that meant she had already walked the next three steps and not liked where they went.

"To a regional archive — a small historical society, the kind he prints the annual lecture for, the kind that collects

the papers of local people who have died or moved or simply got old and wanted their boxes out of the house. He gave them a box of old notebooks because he was a printer who supported the local archive and because he had decided, eleven years ago, that whatever had been in his old life was over, and the notebooks were just paper, just his own young handwriting about meetings long finished, and he wanted them out of the house, the way your sister wants the box off the wardrobe, Adaeze, the way everyone, eventually, wants the weight of the dead out of the house. He gave them to an archive. An open archive. A public one. Catalogued. Shelved. *Readable.*"

Adaeze felt the floor do the thing it had done at the river.

"And the slip," Adaeze said. "The one through Davor's door. Was that them? Was that the second road, telling us about itself?"

Eva was quiet for a moment. "I don't know," she said, and Adaeze understood, by now, that when one of them said *I don't know* plainly like that it was not the end of a thought but the whole of one. "I have turned it every way. Someone wanted Davor warned that the architecture was being re-derived, and wanted it badly enough to forge a neutral hand so we could not read them in it, and did not want, whoever they were, to be known for the warning. That is a person who wanted us moved and did not want to be thanked, or blamed, or found. Which is — " she almost did the thing Therèse's face did " — which is one of ours who could not bear the silence any longer and would not break it openly. Or it is one of theirs, one of the gentle ones, who could not bear what the hard ones were about to do and would not betray them openly. I cannot tell which. I have stopped trying to tell which. They are the same shape,

Adaeze, from opposite sides — a good person doing in the dark the thing they cannot do in the light — and I have come to think the not-being-able-to- tell is not my failure. It is the most honest fact in the folder. We will likely never know who sent it. I have made my peace with the likely. Someone wanted the door moved and wanted no name on the wanting. That is all the slip will ever say. It is, when you think about it, the oldest thing in this whole business, said one more time, by one more hand we will not get to read."

"Felicity's hand," Adaeze said, before she knew she would. "Or Cyprian's. Or — "

"They are dead," Eva said, gently. "All four of them. It was not theirs. But yes. It was that hand. It is always, in the end, that hand."

"And the re-derivers found them," Adaeze said, coming back to the notebooks. "The box of notebooks."

"No," Eva said. "That is the thing. That is the thing that took me three days. The re-derivers have *not* found them. I checked — we checked, we have ways — the archive's records, who has called up that box, who has read it. No one has. In eleven years, four people have looked at Davor's notebooks, and three were a graduate student writing about regional printing and one was a man researching his own grandfather who was in the same town, and none of them was them, and none of them knew what they had in their hands, because to them it is a clerk's old notebooks, charming, irrelevant, a printer's juvenilia. The second road is open. It has been open for eleven years. And no one has walked down it."

"Then we have been lucky," André said, and did not sound like a man comforted by luck.

"The re-derivers do not have it. They have the hard road, the architecture-from-traces, the one with the clock. They do not have the easy road, the one that would hand them, in an afternoon, in a reading room, the entire human key to the whole thing — the names, the mark, the doubts, the structure of how the four of them thought, which is worth more than the architecture itself, because with it you would not have to re-derive anything, you could just — you would have the people. You would have Perpetua. You could finish in a week what the clock says will take them another."

"Then we close it," André said. "We go to the archive. We — "

"With what standing," Therèse said quietly. "We are a department of refusal. We refuse things that come to us through the arrangement. We do not raid public archives. We have never, in forty years, taken a thing that was freely shelved in a public collection. The moment we send someone to a regional historical society to remove a box of a printer's old notebooks because they are dangerous, we have become a thing that removes books from libraries because they are dangerous, and that is — André, that is the *other* door, that is the silence-door with its hand out, that is the first raid, and there is no first raid, there is only ever a first raid and then all the ones it makes ordinary. We cannot take the notebooks. The notebooks are in the world. They are in the world the way the dome is true. We do not get to make them not be."

"Then what," André said.

And Adaeze understood, before Therèse said it, why the procedure had been suspended, and why she had been brought into this room, and what the shape of the days actually was now; understood it the way she had understood

the second cup of tea at the river, in the wrong order, the floor not where her foot expected.

"The failsafe," Adaeze said.

Therèse looked at her.

"It doesn't just answer the re-derivers' road," Adaeze said. "Does it. That's what you all just realised. I'm watching you realise it. It rewrites the architecture so that the hard road is useless — so that everything they reconstruct from traces is reconstructing a thing that no longer works that way. But if it rewrites the architecture, then it also — the notebooks become — "

"The notebooks become history," Eva said softly. "Yes. That is what I saw on the train back. If the failsafe is deployed, then Davor's notebooks, and your sister's box, and every other piece of human paper that points at the old architecture — they all become what they appear to be. Charming. Irrelevant. A clerk's juvenilia. A grandmother's birthday cards. They will point at a machine that no longer exists. The failsafe does not just close the re-derivers' road. It closes *every* road, forever, all at once, the known ones and the unknown ones, the box on the wardrobe and the box in the archive and whatever third and fourth boxes are out there in attics and historical societies that we will never find, because in forty years four people generated a great deal of paper and we have only ever known where some of it was. The failsafe is the only thing that closes the roads we cannot find. That is — " She stopped. "That is, I think, why your grandmother built it the way she built it. Not just to beat the re-derivers. To beat the paper. To make the paper safe to have existed."

The rain went on against the small window. Saskia, who had not spoken, wrote something down, because someone

had to, because the procedure was suspended but the record never was.

And Adaeze sat in the small office with four tired people who refused things for a living and understood that the thing she had been carrying — the box, the secret box, Iyanna's box, the box she had lied to protect, the box she had told no one about, the box that was, she had thought, a danger she alone could see and was managing with a promise — was not the exception to the failsafe.

It was the argument for it.

Every reason she had not told them about the box — to protect Iyanna from becoming a buff folder, from the soft permanent weather of being watched — every one of those reasons evaporated in the small office, because if the failsafe was deployed, no one would ever need to watch Iyanna, or Davor, or the graduate student, or the man researching his grandfather, or anyone, ever, because the box would be birthday cards and the notebooks would be juvenilia and the whole human surround of the thing would become, at a stroke, exactly as harmless as everyone had always assumed it was. The deployment did not create a new prisoner. It freed every accidental keeper of dangerous paper in the world, all at once, including her sister, including her, from ever having to be watched, because there would be nothing left to watch for.

The deployment was the thing that would let Iyanna keep the box on the wardrobe and sort it whenever she liked and let Felicity-who-wrote-like- a-queen go, and never know, and never be watched, and never be a folder, because the box would be, after, only what it had always looked like.

Adaeze put her hand flat on the table. The wood was cool.

"I want to see it," she said.

"See what," Therèse said.

"The lock. The — whatever it is I would do. The failsafe. The mechanism. I have read what it is. I have not seen what it is. If I am going to — if you are going to ask me, tomorrow, or the day after, whenever the procedure un-suspends, to do a thing, I want to have seen the thing. I don't want to decide about a folio. I want to decide about the actual — I want to see where my hand would go."

Therèse and Saskia exchanged a look, the first institutional thing Adaeze had seen pass between two of them, a look that was a small silent referendum, and Saskia, after a moment, gave the smallest nod, the deputy ceding to the keeper of the room's own judgment, and Therèse said:

"Yes. You have the right. Come. It is below. It is further below than you have been. The folio is in the reading room, three flights down. The mechanism is below the reading room. Almost no one has seen it. I have seen it twice in thirty years. Henri has seen it more; Henri is the one who maintains it; in Henri's absence Saskia will take us, because Saskia is now the one. Come and see where your hand would go."

*

They went down past the reading room — Adaeze saw, through the open door as they passed, the table, the two chairs, the folio still lying open on it at the page she had read and could not unread, open all this time, no one having closed it, exactly as the continuity of her own life had left it — and down a further stair she had not known was there, narrower, older, the dressed pale stone giving way to something rougher and much older, until they came to a

small round room at the bottom that was not like anything above it.

It was very old. That was the first thing. The Repository above was forty years old, pale and low and modern in its calm way; but this room at the bottom was old the way a well is old, stone-cut, cool, with the particular silence of deep places, and Adaeze understood that they had not built the Repository and then dug down; they had found this, or made this first, and built the truest building in the world on top of it, the way you build a house over a spring.

In the centre of the round room there was a plinth, and on the plinth there was the lock.

It was not what she had pictured. She had pictured — she did not know what she had pictured; something with the folio in it; something to read; a machine. It was not a machine. It was about the size of a seed-drill, or a small loom, made of brass gone dark and pale wood and a great many fine parts, and set into the front of it, at the height of a seated person's hands, were two shallow hollows the size and shape of two human palms. Above them, worked very small into the dark brass, was a mark she knew — a mark she had seen first on a page that meant nothing to her and would, she had felt, come to mean something later: a circle, with a line through it.

"It is keyed to the hands," Saskia said, quietly, the most she had said all day. "Not to a thumb-mark or a — to the hands. The whole hands. It was made before the machines that read a thumb, and by people who would not have trusted those either, who thought a thing this important should open only to what could not be stolen or copied or coerced as easily as a number — a particular living person, putting two particular living hands into two hollows cast,

forty years ago, from life." She paused. "From a cast taken of a child's hands. A girl of about ten. They took the cast forty years ago, of the hands of a child in your family — your mother, we believe, though the record is thin — because they reasoned that the line would breed roughly true, that the hands of the granddaughter would fit, near enough, the cast of the daughter, that hands run in families the way faces do. They made the lock fit a child who is now your dead mother, so that it would fit, one day, near enough, a woman not yet born. They were betting on your hands, Adaeze, before your mother had finished growing into the hands they cast. That is how far ahead your grandmother was thinking. She cast her own granddaughter's hands by casting her daughter's, forty years early, and built a lock around the guess."

Adaeze stood in the cool old round room at the bottom of the world and looked at the two hollows shaped like a dead child's hands who had been her mother, with her grandmother's mark above them, and she did not, for a long moment, breathe.

Then she stepped forward, and she did not put her hands in — she was not going to put her hands in, not today, today was only seeing — but she held them, her two keeper's hands with the comma-scar on one of them, above the two hollows, an inch above, not touching, the way she had held her two fingers an inch from the gate-post on the wrong side in the dark saying goodbye to an otter, the way she had rested two fingers on Henri's open palm; and her hands, she saw, even an inch above, even without touching, fit; the hollows were shaped for hands like hers; her dead mother's ten-year-old hands had grown, across forty years and one generation, into hers, and the lock had been waiting the whole time, in the cool, in the dark, under the truest building in the world, for

the hands it had been built to expect, which were, it turned out, hers, which had been hers before she was born, before her mother was grown, before the vote-by-post, before the otters, before any of it; she had been, without knowing, the shape this lock was cut to receive for her entire life, and longer, since before her life, since a morning forty years ago when someone took a cast of a serious ten-year-old's hands and the ten-year-old did not know why and grew up and taught her own daughter to drive on a road outside Onitsha and died not having told her either, and the cast waited.

She took her hands back. She folded them under her arms, against the cardigan, against the four papers over her heart.

"All right," she said. "I've seen it."

"Yes," Therèse said.

"I want to go up now."

"Yes."

They went up, out of the old round room and the deep silence, past the reading room where the folio lay open, up the three flights of dressed pale stone, into the true dome, where it was late afternoon and the high indirect light had gone golden and a child somewhere among the stacks was reading aloud, very quietly, to herself or to no one, in a language Adaeze did not know, the small private sound of a person who has found a book and a corner and does not know or care that the floor she is sitting on is the lid of a very old well at the bottom of which two brass hollows shaped like a dead woman's child-hands wait, in the dark, for the only living hands that fit them, which were upstairs now, folded under a keeper's arms, an inch from where they had hovered, not yet, not yet, but soon, and freely, because that was the one thing the whole machine, for all its forty years of

cunning, could not make her do.

It could only wait to see if she would.

Outside, the clock ran. Two days. The rain had stopped. The river was low and bright and did not know what day it was, and went on being a river, under the bridges, past the willows, toward the sea, the way the world went on being good, all around the small dark room where the choice waited, the way the world always had, which was the thing that made it so hard, which was the thing that made it almost impossible, which was the thing her grandmother had known and built around and could not herself resolve: that the world did not feel like a place with a locked room under it. It felt like a place where a child read in the golden light. Both were true. They did not cancel. They ran into the dark side by side like two rails, and the train ran on them, and the train was everything, and her hands fit the lock.

She went to find something to do with them.

Chapter Nineteen

What Iyanna Knows

They gave her a night, before the asking. Therèse called it that, *a night,* the way you would say it to someone before a surgery — *you will have the night; sleep if you can; we will come in the morning* — and Adaeze understood that the procedure had un-suspended itself in some office she would never see, that the forms had finished resting, that the nine days had become, somewhere, the formal end of the nine days, and that tomorrow, the tenth day, with one day left on the clock after it, they would take her down past the reading room to the cool round room and ask her to put her hands in the hollows or not.

She asked, that evening, if she could call her sister.

"Yes," Therèse said. "Of course. You have never had to ask. I have told you that. The log will say a call was made. It will not say anything else. Call her. Call her from the courtyard, where the fig tree is; the reception is better there, and you will want, I think, to be outside, and to see something growing, when you do it."

So Adaeze sat on the cool stone rim of the unused fountain, in the courtyard, in the long northern evening that did not get dark until very late this far up the world, with the fig tree putting out its early figs hard and green above her and the three pigeons resettling themselves for the night on the rim beside her at a polite distance, and she called Iyanna, on the ordinary phone, across the six thousand kilometres,

and listened to it ring into the warm Lagos night that was, there, already fully dark.

Iyanna answered on the fourth ring.

"It's late there," Iyanna said, instead of hello. "Or early. I can never work out which way you are."

"It's evening. It doesn't get dark. I'm sitting outside. There's a fig tree."

"A fig tree." A pause, in which Adaeze could hear, behind her sister, the sounds of the mother's house at night — the particular hum of its old refrigerator, a radio somewhere low, the sea-sound that was always under everything in that house if you listened. "You're calling me from under a fig tree in a place where it doesn't get dark, on the ordinary phone, at an hour you'd normally not. So this is the call."

"What call."

"Don't," Iyanna said, not unkindly. "Adaeze. Don't make me be the one who says what it is. I've spent this whole — however long it's been, I've lost count, I've been keeping a roof on a house and a cat alive and a box on a wardrobe and I've spent the whole of it not making you say things, which you know is not my nature, which has cost me actual sleep, the not-saying. So don't make me say this one either. You called to say something. I can hear it sitting on you. Say it."

Adaeze looked at the green figs.

"I might not be able to come home for a while," she said. "Longer than the training. After the — after the thing I'm here for finishes, there might be — there might be more. I don't know yet. I wanted you to know that it might be longer. That's the call."

She heard herself keep going, which she had not planned. "And I'm not going to lie to you about it, Yanna. That's the other half of why I called — maybe the realer half. The

training was a lie. I knew it was a lie when I said it, standing in your doorway with my face doing whatever my face does, and I've hated it every day since. I can't tell you what this really is. I might never be able to. But I'm finished lying to you about it. When I can't tell you a thing, from now on, I'll just not tell you it. I won't build you a paint-counter version to stand there not believing."

It was the truest thing she had said to anyone all season, and it cost her, and she felt it cost her, the way the lie in the hospital corridor had cost her when at last she set it down. She had three lies in her now and a coat going on one true-thing-not-said at a time and a woman called Margriet thirty years down that road, and she had decided, somewhere between the lock-room and the courtyard, that whatever else she did or did not do tomorrow, she was finished lying to her sister. So she told her a true thing. Not all of it. She would never be able to tell her all of it; that was the permanent shape of it now; but what she said would be true, and Iyanna, who heard lies the way she heard the wrong green, would hear that it was true, and that would have to be the new thing between them, the thing that replaced being fully known: *I will only ever tell you true things, even when I cannot tell you all of them.*

There was a silence on the line. The refrigerator hummed in Lagos. A pigeon shifted on the fountain in the city of pale stone.

"All right," Iyanna said, at last. "I'll take that. A true thing and a shut door over a lie, any day I'm given the choice — you know that about me; it's practically my whole religion."

And then: "Adaeze. I'm going to say a thing, and I'm going to say it once, and then I'm going to let you go back to your fig tree, because I can tell this is costing you something

to even — all right. Here is the thing.

"I know it's not a training."

Adaeze closed her eyes.

"I've known since the car," Iyanna said. "Since I stood in the doorway and watched a car that was not a taxi take my sister away, with a driver who sat the way people sit when sitting is their job, and you didn't wave, you just looked at me through the glass with the face, the face you had the week Mama died, and I thought, *that is not a training*. I don't know what it is. I have decided — and this has been the hardest decision of my adult life, harder than the roof, harder than Mama's room — I have decided I do not want to know what it is. Do you understand what I'm telling you? I'm not being noble. I'm being a coward, maybe, or I'm being wise, I can't tell which and I've stopped trying. But I worked out, somewhere around the second strange letter and the woman in the coat with the money for the cat, that whatever you've walked into is the kind of thing where knowing it would put it on me too, and that you are carrying it precisely so that it isn't on me, and that if I push — if I do the thing I have done your whole life, the thing I'm good at, the going-toward-the-avoided-thing — then I take the one thing you're trying to give me, which is not having to carry it. So I'm not going to push. I'm telling you that I see you not telling me, and that I have decided to let you not tell me, and that this is the most I have ever loved you, in this exact moment, choosing to not know my own sister's life because not-knowing is the gift you're bleeding to give me. There. That's the thing. I've said it. I'll never say it again."

Adaeze was crying on the fountain-rim, the quiet kind, the kind that was just water, and the pigeons did not mind, and the fig tree did not mind, and six thousand kilometres

away her sister waited, and did not fill the silence, which was the gift on top of the gift, because Iyanna filling silences was as deep a fact about her as anything, and she was, tonight, not doing it, on purpose, for Adaeze.

"The box," Adaeze managed, finally.

"Is on the wardrobe," Iyanna said. "Exactly where it was. I promised you. I haven't touched it. I won't, until you're home, however long that is. I'll keep it for you. I'll keep it the way Mama kept it, with the cedar in, against the insects. It'll be there. Whatever you walked into, the box is one thing you don't have to think about, because I've got it, because you asked me to, and a thing you ask me to keep, I keep. You know that. It's the whole reason you asked me and not — you asked me because you knew I'd keep it past sense, past reason, past my own nature, just because you asked. So it's kept. Stop thinking about the box."

And Adaeze understood, on the fountain-rim, with a completeness that arrived all at once and would not leave her again, the last piece of the thing she would carry into the round room tomorrow:

That Iyanna was keeping the box out of love, blind, for her sake. That the box was, right now, tonight, harmless only because of an accident of love — because one woman had asked another to keep it and the other had said yes — and that this was the most fragile possible safety in the world; that love is not a vault; that Iyanna would keep her promise faithfully and die someday, the way everyone died, and the house would be cleared the way Mama's room was cleared, by someone who loved someone, and the box would be opened by hands that did not know, the way Adaeze had once held a card signed *with love, your CYPRIAN* and put it back not knowing; that the box was safe tonight and would

not be safe forever, because nothing kept by love alone is safe forever, because love does not outlive the lovers, because the only thing that keeps a dangerous thing safe past the lifespan of the people who happen to love each other is a machine, a cold one, a deliberate one, a lock cast from a child's hands and set in a round room under a library; and that this — *this,* her sister's voice in the Lagos dark saying *stop thinking about the box, I've got it* — was the exact thing the failsafe existed to make unnecessary; that if she went down tomorrow and put her hands in the hollows, then Iyanna would never have to keep the box past sense again, because there would be nothing in the box to keep, because it would be birthday cards, because a woman called Felicity would just be a woman who wrote like a queen, because the deployment would reach into every house in the world where someone was keeping dangerous paper out of love and quietly turn the paper back into paper, and her sister could stop being, without knowing she was, the most fragile lock in the world.

The deployment would free Iyanna from the box.

But it would also — and Adaeze made herself hold both, the two pages, the breeze going across the desk — it would also be Adaeze doing to eight billion people exactly what Iyanna was, tonight, choosing to have done to her: deciding, out of love, that they were better off not knowing; taking from them the choice to know; keeping the box on the wardrobe of the world forever, with the cedar in, against the insects, *because I asked you to, because a thing you ask me to keep I keep*. The deployment would make Adaeze into Iyanna — the keeper who loves you enough to not let you carry what she carries — and it would make the whole human race into Adaeze: the one who is loved, and

protected, and managed, and never told, for her own good, by someone who has decided that not-knowing is the kindest gift.

And the unbearable thing, the thing she would carry down the stairs tomorrow, was that she did not know whether Iyanna's choice tonight was beautiful or terrible. Her sister had just refused to know her own sister's life out of love. Was that the most loving thing anyone had ever done for Adaeze, or was it Iyanna abandoning her to carry the thing alone, dressed up as a gift? Was *don't tell me, I'd rather not carry it* love, or was it the most comfortable available form of looking away? She did not know. She could not tell. And if she could not tell, about her own sister, on a phone, in the dark — how was she to decide it for eight billion strangers tomorrow, with her hands in two hollows shaped like a dead woman's child-hands?

Hadiya had said: *no one knows*. Mama Nneka had said: *I built the whole thing and I do not know*. And now here it was again, the same not-knowing, arrived by the smallest possible road, through the one person who loved her plainly: Adaeze did not even know whether to be grateful to her own sister, and the not-knowing was the same not-knowing, it was all one not-knowing, it ran under everything like the sea-sound under the mother's house.

"Thank you," Adaeze said. "For keeping the box. For — for the other thing. For deciding not to know. I don't know if it's right, what you're doing. I want you to know that. I don't think you should do it because it's obviously right. I think you should do it because you've chosen it, and you know you've chosen it, and you don't know if it's right either. I think that's — I think that's the only honest way anyone does anything this big. Choosing it. Knowing you chose it. Not

knowing if it was right."

There was a silence.

"You've gotten strange, Adaeze," Iyanna said, but her voice was soft, and wet, and not unkind. "Wherever you are. Whatever it is. You've gotten strange and a little frightening and you talk like Mama did at the very end, when she'd stopped pretending to be sure about things. I used to hate it when she did that. I understand it better now. Come home when you can. Be strange here. There's room for strange here. The house is here. The chair is here. The box is here. I'm here. Come home and be strange where I can see you."

"I will," Adaeze said. "Yanna — I will. As soon as I can. I promise."

"Don't promise. You're bad at it lately. Just come."

"All right."

"All right." A breath. "Go to your fig tree. Sleep if it ever gets dark. I love you. The cat says nothing, because the cat is a cat, but I'm choosing to believe it would, if it were a better animal. Goodnight, Adaeze."

"Goodnight, Yanna."

The line went. The Lagos dark and the refrigerator and the sea-sound went with it, six thousand kilometres folding shut, and Adaeze sat on the rim of the unused fountain in the long pale northern evening that would not get dark, with the green figs hard above her and the pigeons settled now, trusting her, part of the architecture, and she held the dead phone in her two hands — the hands that fit the lock — and she did not, for a long time, move.

She thought about the box on the wardrobe, kept by love, which is not a vault.

She thought about eight billion people, kept by a machine, which is not love.

She thought that her grandmother had spent forty years and a whole life's cunning building a cold machine precisely because she had understood, as Adaeze understood it now on a fountain-rim, that love was not enough to keep a dangerous thing safe past the death of the people who loved each other — and that this was the most clear-eyed and the most heartbroken thing a person could possibly understand, the thing that made you build the cage: not that you didn't trust love, but that you loved it too much to ask it to do a job it would always, eventually, fail at, because the lovers die, and the box gets cleared, and the hands that open it next do not know.

And she thought that Hadiya would say: but a machine that keeps the box forever also keeps everyone forever children, never told, never asked, loved-at like Iyanna was loving-at her tonight, managed, protected, diminished; and that a world of people kept safe by a cold machine they cannot see is exactly a world of eight billion Iyannas, each one choosing, without ever getting to choose, not to know.

Both true. The two rails. The train.

It did not, that night, get dark. She sat under the fig tree until very late, in the grey-gold northern not-dark, and at some point she stopped crying, and at some point she went in, and she did not sleep, lying down, which was better; and in the morning they came for her, gently, with tea, to take her down and ask her; and she went; and the hands that fit the lock went with her, folded under her arms, against the four papers over her heart, an inch from the choice, the way they had been her whole life without her knowing, waiting in the dark of her own sleeves for the morning someone would finally ask her to open them.

Chapter Twenty

Karim

They came for her with tea, as Therèse had said they would, and they did not take her down.

"There is a change," Therèse said. She had the look again, the moved- ground look, and Adaeze was learning to read its gradations now, and this was a bad one, worse than the suspension, worse than Eva's folder. "I am going to put a thing in front of you, and I am going to tell you first that you are free to refuse it, more free than you have been about anything, because this one is not ours, this one comes from the other side, and we would ordinarily not even carry it to you, except that we have decided — I have decided, and Saskia has agreed, and it cost us the night to agree it — that not carrying it to you would be a kind of lie, and we have promised you no lies, and so." She set it down. It was a single sheet, folded, opened, and it was not in Hadiya's hand. "He wants to meet you. Before tomorrow. Once. The man behind them. The one Hadiya is not."

"Karim," Adaeze said. She did not know how she knew the name. She had never heard it. But she had felt, the whole season, the shape of someone behind Hadiya, the way you feel a larger room behind an open door, and now the shape had a name, and the name was on her tongue before the page.

"Karim," Therèse said. "Yes. That is the name we have. We do not have much else. He is the one who — Adaeze, I

want to be exact, because you are about to decide whether to sit in a room with him, and you should know what you are sitting with. He is the one who sent them into the Repository. The young man with the camera. The ones who spoke in the round. That was not Hadiya; you were right about Hadiya; that was him. He decided that the daylight was worth Henri's skull. He has not said so; but we know the shape of their decisions now, and that one was his, the way Brigitta's heel was Brigitta's and no one else's, except that Brigitta is destroyed by hers and we have no reason to think Karim is destroyed by his. He may be. We do not know. You would be sitting with the man who, as near as we can tell, weighed an old man's life against his cause and found the cause heavier. I will take you, if you wish to go. I will not take you if you do not. And I will tell you the thing that is hardest for me to tell you, which is that I think you should go, and I do not fully know why I think it, except that tomorrow you decide, and I would rather you decided having looked at the whole of it, including the part of it that put Henri on the floor."

"Where," Adaeze said.

"He has named a church," Therèse said. "Not for God. For the rules of it. A church is the one place left in the world where two people who should not meet can sit in the same room and the room itself promises that nothing will happen — old rules, older than us, older than the Council, sanctuary, the word means what it says. He has chosen it so that you will know you are safe, and so that we will know it, and so that he is telling us, by choosing it, that he understands exactly what he is, that he is a man who now has to meet people inside the one rule that guarantees he will not do to them what his people did to Henri. It is, I think, the most

honest thing he could have chosen. It is also a church, and you will be alone in it with him, and I will be outside, and that is the arrangement, and you do not have to take it."

"I'll take it," Adaeze said.

*

The church was small and old and mostly empty, the way the churches were in this city of pale stone — kept, swept, lit by the same high northern light as everything else, attended by a handful of the very old and visited by tourists who lowered their voices without quite knowing why. It smelled of cold stone and candle-wax and the particular dust of places that are looked after but not used. Therèse stopped at the door.

"I will be here," she said. "On this bench, outside, in the sun. I will not come in unless you come out and ask me to, or unless — I will be here. Take whatever time. There is no clock on this. The clock is on everything else but I have decided there is no clock on this, you may have this for as long as it takes, even if it costs us a day, because if you are going to do the thing tomorrow you should have heard the man who thinks you should not, all the way to the end of him." She paused. "His name is Karim. He had a sister. I am going to tell you that now, before you go in, not to arm you but because he will tell you anyway and I would rather you not hear it for the first time from him, with his weight on it.

"He had a sister. She died, a long time ago, waiting for a decision that we made. Not a decision about the door. An ordinary refusal, an early one, before my time — a treatment, a method, dual-use, refused, in the ordinary form, the way we refused the researcher, the way we always do. His sister

needed the thing we refused. She did not get it. She died. He has spent the rest of his life understanding, correctly, that an institution he could not see, for reasons he was not allowed to know, weighed his sister's life against a future harm and found the future heavier, and did not tell him, and let him think it was the disease that killed her, when it was, in part, us.

"He found out later. I do not know how. He has been, ever since, the most dangerous kind of person there is, which is a person who is right.

"Go in, Adaeze. He is waiting. He has been waiting, I think, his whole life, for someone the door would actually listen to. You are the first one. Go and let him talk to the door."

Adaeze went in.

He was sitting near the front, not in the front pew but the second, off to one side, an ordinary-looking man of perhaps sixty, grey-bearded, heavy in the shoulders in the way of a man who had once been strong and was now only solid, with his hands resting on the back of the pew in front of him and his eyes on the small plain altar that he was, very clearly, not praying to. He did not turn when she came in. He waited until she had come down the aisle and stopped at the end of his pew, and then he said, still looking at the altar:

"You are smaller than I expected. I don't know why I expected — I think I had built you very large, in my mind. The granddaughter. The one the whole thing turns on. I had made you into a kind of giant. And here you are, an ordinary woman, tired, in a borrowed cardigan, and I find it is worse, somehow, that you are ordinary. It is easier to be at war with giants. Sit. Please. Not — not next to me, you don't have to, sit where you like, sit where you can see the door, I know

they have told you what I am. I would, in your place, sit where I could see the door."

Adaeze sat, across the aisle, where she could see the door.

"Thank you for coming," Karim said. "I did not think you would. Hadiya said you would. Hadiya is usually right about people; it is her gift, the reading; she said *she will come, she is a keeper, a keeper goes toward the thing that needs her even when it is dangerous, especially when it is dangerous,* and she was right, you came, and so I owe Hadiya another small humiliation, which is the tax I pay for being the kind of man who is right about everything except people." He turned, finally, and looked at her, and his eyes were not what she had braced for; they were tired, and clear, and kind, and that was the worst thing, the kindness, the same worst thing as Hadiya's honesty, the thing that gave way like water. "You have met Hadiya. You have heard the gentle version. The door should be knowable; daylight; the patient argument.

"I want you to know that I believe every word Hadiya says. She is not my softer mask. She is my conscience, and she is better than me, and if the world were going to last long enough for patience to work I would tell you to listen to her and not to me.

"But I am the one who sent the boy with the camera, and I am going to tell you why, and I am not going to pretend to you that I am sorry in the way you want me to be sorry, because you have spent a season among people who are exquisitely sorry, who are sorry the way other people are devout, and I think their sorrow is the most dangerous thing about them, and I will not give you more of it."

"An old man is in a hospital," Adaeze said.

"Henri," Karim said. "Yes. I know his name. I make myself know all their names; Hadiya taught me that, or

rather I taught it to her and then she did it better, the way conscience always does the master's lesson better than the master. Henri. Eighty. I know. I weighed it. You want me to say I did not weigh it, that it was a mistake, that the boy exceeded his instructions — the boy did exceed his instructions, for what it is worth, he was not to touch anyone, he panicked, but that is an evasion and I will not hide behind it — I sent them knowing that bodies in motion near doors sometimes fall, that old men are fragile, that the chance of a Henri was not zero. I weighed an old man I had never met against the thing I am trying to do, and I judged the thing heavier, and I was, I believe, correct to, and I will carry Henri for the rest of my life, and both of those are true, the correctness and the carrying, and if you have learned anything in your season among the keepers you have learned that two true things that should cancel often do not. They taught you that. They taught you well. I am about to use it against them."

"Tell me about your sister," Adaeze said.

He was quiet for a moment. A very old woman near the front lit a candle, slowly, with great care, and shuffled out, and the door let in a wedge of the high light and closed it off again.

"They told you," he said. "Of course they told you. They are so honest. It is their whole weapon, the honesty; have you noticed; they hand you the worst of themselves so that you cannot accuse them of hiding it, and the handing-over feels so much like virtue that you forget to notice they are still doing the thing, they are just doing it with clean hands and a sad face. Yes. My sister. Leila. She was older than me. She raised me, mostly; our mother was sick a long time; Leila raised me, and she was — she was like your Hadiya,

actually, clever and certain and kind, she would have liked Hadiya, they would have been unbearable together, two women who are right.

"She was not a saint. I want to be accurate, because the dead get sainted and it is a second death, it turns them into a lesson, and she was not a lesson. She was bossy. She was vain about her hands, of all things — she kept them beautiful and was insufferable about mine — and she sang flat, on purpose, to drive me out of a room when she wanted it to herself, and she once did not speak to me for eleven days because I bought a coat she had told me not to buy. She was a real and specific and irritating person, and I would give the rest of what I have to be irritated by her one more time.

"She got sick. There was a thing that could have helped her. It existed. It had been made — not for her, for something else, but it would have crossed over, these things cross over, the way the poison and the cure are the same six pages read with a different eye, you know this now, you have learned the whole shape of it. The thing that could have helped her was refused. Quietly. In the ordinary form. By people in a room she did not know existed, weighing her life — not even her life, her life was not on the table, her life was a number that did not appear, what was on the table was the *method,* and the method was dual-use, and they refused the method, correctly, by their lights, to keep it from a future basement, and the refusal of the method was the death of my sister, and she died not knowing, thinking it was only the disease, thinking the world had simply not yet found the thing that would have saved her, when the world had found it, and had decided she could not have it, for reasons that were real, that I have studied, that I understand, that I cannot even fully say were wrong."

"Karim —"

"Let me finish. You owe me finishing. I have owed myself finishing for thirty years and I have never had the one person it should be said to in front of me, and you are the one person, you are the door's own ear, so let me finish."

He had not raised his voice. He spoke the way Therèse spoke, low and exact, and Adaeze understood with a kind of vertigo that they were the same, Karim and Therèse, that they had been made by the same press, that grief and rightness and a low exact voice were the marks of everyone the door had touched, on whichever side.

"She died not knowing. That is the thing. Not that she died; people die; I am not a child; I do not rage at death. She died *not knowing*. She died inside a kindness. They had decided, the room, that it was better for her not to know that the thing existed and had been refused, because to tell her would be to tell her about the room, and the room must not be known, and so she went into the ground believing she lived in a world that had simply not yet been clever enough to save her, when in fact she lived in a world that had been clever enough and had chosen, lovingly, behind her back, that she should not have it. They loved her. Do you understand? That is what I cannot forgive and cannot refute. They were not cruel to her. They were kind to her. They gave her the kindest available death, which was a death inside not-knowing, a death that did not have to also carry the knowledge that she had been weighed and found lighter than a hypothetical. They protected her from that. With love."

He stopped, and pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose the way the very tired do, and when he took them away she saw that the cold of the church was in him too, that he had been sitting in it a long time before she came.

"The same love your sister is using on you right now, yes, I know about your sister, Hadiya reads everything, the same love, *I will not make you carry what I carry, I will keep it from you for your own good* — and it is the kindest thing and it is the theft of the last decision of her life and they are the same thing, they are the same thing, and I have spent thirty years unable to pull them apart, and I have concluded that they cannot be pulled apart, that kindness-by-concealment and theft-of-choice are not two things that sometimes occur together but one thing with two names, and that a world built on it, however kind, however good, however much better than every world that came before — and it is better, I will not insult you by pretending the Council has not made a better world, it has, my sister lived in a world with no war in it and clean air and that is not nothing, that is enormous — a world built on that one thing, the kind concealment, the loving theft, is a world I do not consent to, and the not-consenting is the only thing I have left of Leila, because she never got to not-consent, they took her consent and wrapped it in love and buried it with her, and I am her brother, and I am doing her not-consenting for her, thirty years late, the only way I can, which is to try to make the room knowable, so that the next Leila at least dies knowing, at least gets to be angry, at least gets the last decision, which is the decision about whether to rage or to accept, which they took from mine."

The church was very quiet. The candle the old woman had lit guttered and steadied.

Adaeze found that she had nothing. She had come in with the keepers' case half-assembled in her — the dome, the child in the raincoat, the eight billion, the cold machine that outlives love — and she could not say a word of it, because he

had already conceded all of it, had handed her every card she held, and was still, having given it all away, right.

You did not argue with a refusal. He was not making a case she could win against; he was doing the one thing the Custody itself did, planting himself and saying *not in my name,* the way her grandmother had said it on the small page — and a no of that kind is never refuted. It is only ever overruled. Which was exactly what she would do tomorrow.

So she did not argue. She did the other thing, the only thing she knew how to do with something hurt in front of her, the thing she had been doing since she sat down without once deciding to: she read him. The cold of the church had got all the way into him. He had been here a long time before her, an old man in a coat a little too thin for the stone, his hands stiff at the knuckles when he gestured, the heaviness in him not strength any more but the way a tired body hoards itself. She did not think he had eaten. She did not think anyone had cooked for this man in a long while.

"When did you last have something hot," she said.

It came out before she could examine it. It was not a move. It was the question she would have asked a new animal off a long transport — the question that lived under all her other questions.

And Karim, who was right about everything except people, misread her. She watched him do it: watched him reach for the angle in it, the kindness-as-instrument he had spent thirty years learning to parry, the Custody's whole soft weather turned on him one more time — and find none, because there was none, because she was only a keeper looking at a cold and hungry and grieving creature and unable, the way she was unable to change the colour of her own eyes, to not want to warm it.

"That," he said at last, and the low exact voice was not quite level, "is not a question I prepared for. I prepared for all of them." He looked down at his own stiff hands as though they belonged to someone he was nursing. "A long time. I don't — a long time."

"You can't refute me," Karim said, gently, reading her face the way his conscience had taught him. "I know. I am not trying to be refuted. I gave that up long ago. I am not here to win an argument. I am here to be a witness you cannot un-see."

At the back of the church a tourist came in, took two steps into the cold, felt the something that empty old churches keep, and went out again; the door breathed a wedge of light and swallowed it.

"Tomorrow they will take you down to the room, and they will be so gentle, and they will leave it to you, freely, and you will stand in front of the thing with your hands that fit it, and in that moment I want you to not be able to not see me. That is all I came for. Not to change your mind. I do not think I can change your mind; Hadiya says you are a keeper and keepers keep and you will, in the end, keep; she is usually right. I came so that when you do it — if you do it — you will do it knowing that you are overruling a real person who said not in my name, that you are doing to some future Leila exactly what was done to mine, sealing her inside a kindness she did not choose, and that you knew it, and you did it anyway, because you decided the world was worth it." He let that sit. "I can live with you deciding the world is worth it. What I could not live with — what I have not been able to live with for thirty years — is it being done by people who will not even let themselves know they are doing it. They wrap it in procedure and sorrow and tea and they make it so

that no single person ever has to stand where you are standing and say *I am choosing this, I am choosing the kind concealment, I am choosing to steal the world's last decision, and I know that is what I am choosing*."

His hands had come off the pew-back; they were folded in his lap now, one over the other, the way you hold a joint that has started to ache.

"You are going to be the first one who has to actually choose it, out loud, inside yourself, knowing. Your grandmother built you to be free and the freedom means you are the first one who cannot hide behind the procedure. So do not hide behind it. That is my whole ask. Whatever you choose, choose it as a person, not as a procedure. Be at least as honest as my sister was forced to be, who died honest because they gave her no choice but honesty, no comfort of the room, nothing but the disease and her own dying — be at least that honest, on purpose, freely, you who have every comfort and every reason and the gentlest people in the world telling you it is all right. Be the one who does not get to say it was all right. That is what your grandmother made you for. Not to keep the door. To be unable to keep it comfortably. To be the splinter in the procedure. The first keeper who has to *know*."

Adaeze sat in the cold bright church for a long time.

"My grandmother," she said, at last, "wrote that she didn't know if she was right. That she built the whole thing and went to her grave not knowing."

"I believe it," Karim said. "I have read the same fragment Hadiya gave you; we have it; it is how I knew she was the one who would understand, if any of them ever did. Your grandmother is the only one of the four I have ever been able to mourn. The others were certain. Hippolytus especially; I

have his certainties; they are obscene; a man should not be that sure of a thing he is doing to strangers.

"But Perpetua knew. *We are incurring it in the dark*. She knew there was a debt. She just decided to incur it anyway, and to build, out of her own bloodline, one person who would have to incur it in the *light* — you — as a kind of, I don't know, a kind of penance she would never be alive to pay, a way of making sure that at least once, at the very end, the debt would be incurred by someone who saw the creditor's face. I am the creditor's face, Adaeze. I am Leila's face.

"She sent you to me, your grandmother, forty years ago, without knowing my name; she built a machine that would, at the last, put you in a church with the brother of someone the machine had killed, so that you could not do the thing without looking at what it costs. She was the most honest of them and this is her honesty: not that she stopped the machine, but that she made sure it would, once, be operated by someone who had to look at me first. Here I am. Look.

"And then go and do whatever you are going to do, and may you have, all your life, the thing my sister was denied and your grandmother chose, which is the knowledge of what you did. It is a terrible gift. It is the only one either of them had to give."

He stood. He was heavier standing, older, an ordinary solid grieving man in an empty church, and he did up one button of his coat, and he looked at her once more, and the kindness in his tired eyes was the most unbearable thing in a season of unbearable things.

"I hope you keep it," he said. "The door. I have spent my life trying to open it and I hope, looking at you, that you keep it, because you will keep it *knowing,* and a door kept by

someone who knows what it costs is the best we are likely to get, better than my daylight, probably, which might kill everyone, I am not a fool, I know what I am risking. I hope you keep it and I hope it ruins you the way it ruined your grandmother, because a door kept by the ruined is the only kind that stays honest, and the day they find someone who can keep it unruined, who can put their hands in the hollows and sleep well after, that is the day I was right all along, that is the day it should be torn open, and I will not be alive to see which it turns out to be, and neither, mercifully, will you. Goodbye, Adaeze. Thank you for looking at me. It is more than they ever let Leila have. It is more than I expected. It is, I find, enough."

And he walked up the aisle, past her, an old man's heavy unhurried walk, and he did not touch her, and he did not look back, and he went out through the door into the wedge of high light, past where a woman in a grey coat sat on a bench in the sun, and the two of them did not speak, the keeper and the creditor, they only looked at each other for a moment, two people made by the same press, and then Karim went one way down the bright street and Therèse came in through the door the other way, into the cold and the candle-smell, and found Adaeze sitting in the second pew off to one side, where Karim had been, in the exact place the man who killed Henri had warmed, with her hands open in her lap, not doing the latch, looking at the small plain altar she was also not praying to.

Therèse sat down across the aisle, where Adaeze could see the door.

"He is right," Adaeze said. "I couldn't — Therèse, I had everything, I had all of it, the dome and the child and the — and he gave it all to me, he agreed with all of it, and he's still

right. How is he still right when I'm also right? How are you both —"

"Because it is real," Therèse said, very gently. "That is what real is. The fake ones, you can refute; the cartoons, the fanatics, the tyrants; those you can win against, and people who have only ever fought those go through life thinking that being right means the other one is wrong. But the real ones — the real choices, the ones that actually cost something — both sides are right, that is what makes them the real ones, that is the whole of what makes them so hard, and there is no view from above where it resolves, there is no place to stand where you can see that one of them is the true one, because they are both the true one, and you have to choose anyway, in the dark, with both of them true, and live with it.

"That is the thing my whole life is. That is the thing your grandmother could not bear and built a machine to make sure someone, once, would have to bear on purpose. He is right. I am right. Tomorrow you choose between two right things and the choosing does not make either of them wrong, it only makes one of them *chosen,* and you carry the other one, the un-chosen right thing, for the rest of your life, the way I carry Margriet, the way he carries the daylight he will never get, the way your grandmother carried the debt.

"Come. Not down, not yet; tomorrow. Come and eat something. You have looked at the creditor. It was the last thing left to look at. There is nothing more to see now. There is only the choosing, and it will keep until morning, and you should not do it hungry. Come, Adaeze. Come and let me make you a bad true soup. It is the only thing I have left to give you that does not cost you anything to receive."

And Adaeze stood, and did not do the latch, and went with her, out of the cold bright church into the warm bright street, past the bench, into the city of pale stone that did not know what was under it, that went on being good all around the small dark room where, tomorrow, with both of them right, she would have to choose.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Failsafe

In the morning it was raining again, the small thoughtful rain, and she woke before they came for her, and lay in the bed in the room with the fig tree and listened to it, and did not, for once, mind that she had not slept, because the not-sleeping had stopped being a thing that was done to her and had become a thing she was doing, a vigil, the last of the nights she would spend as a person who had not yet done the thing, and she found she wanted to be awake for the end of it.

She got up. She washed. She put on the sky-coloured cardigan that Therèse had bought her in a shop near a station a lifetime ago, because she had not, in the whole season, bought herself anything else, and because she had decided in the night that she would not do the thing in borrowed clothes pretending to be her own; she would do it in the one thing she owned that someone had chosen for her with care, which was as close to honest as her wardrobe got. She moved the four papers from the night-table into the inside pocket, over her heart, where they went: her grandmother's first note, and Iyanna's letter, and the doubt-fragment, and the long last letter. She did not read any of them again. She had them by heart now, all four, the way she had the latching ritual by heart, in the body, below the place where reading happened.

Therèse came at eight, with Saskia, and with tea, and did not say good morning, because there was no good in the morning and she would not insult it by pretending; she said only, "It is today," and Adaeze said, "Yes," and drank the tea, and they went down.

*

There was a procedure for it. Of course there was. There was a form, the last form, the one that had been resting all those required hours, and it was read aloud in the antechamber by Saskia in a level voice, and it said, in the dry exact language of the whole architecture, what was about to be done and by whom and that it was being done freely; and Adaeze signed it, in the place for signing; and Therèse signed it, as witness; and Saskia signed it, as the one who maintained the room in Henri's absence; and there was a place on the form, Adaeze saw, for a second witness, an old place, the ink-line for it faded, and Saskia said, quietly, "Henri would have signed there. He has signed there for forty years. We will leave it blank. He would want it left blank rather than filled by another. It is his line." And they left it blank, the old man's line, the wall's line, and that blank space was the only mark on the whole form that meant anything to Adaeze, the one human thing in the dry language, an absence shaped like a man in a hospital bed facing a dome he could not reach.

Then the two keys turned, Saskia's and Therèse's, with the small mechanical agreement Adaeze remembered from her first day, the audible yes of the dual lock that could only ever say no; and the door opened; and they went down.

They went down past the reading room. The folio still lay open on the table, at the page Adaeze had read on her second morning and could not unread, open all this time, no one ever having closed it, and as they passed Adaeze stopped, and looked at it, and then she did a small thing that no procedure called for: she went in, and she closed it. She laid her finger in, and laid the cover over — it was heavier than a book's cover, a deliberate weight, made to resist a careless hand — and drew her finger out, the way you close any book you have finished, and the folio settled shut on the table without a sound, the leather warm, or seeming warm, the way it had seemed warm the first time. She did not know why she did it. It was not in the form. It was only that the book had been open and reading itself to an empty room for a whole season, the dangerous open book, and she found she could not walk down past it to do the thing without first, at last, closing it, the way you close the eyes of the dead, the way you latch a gate so it does not forget it is a gate. Saskia watched her do it and did not stop her and wrote nothing down, because some things are not for the record, she was learning what those were.

Then they went down the further stair, the narrow old one, into the round room at the bottom of the world, where the lock waited on its plinth, dark brass and pale wood, the two palm-hollows, the circle with the line through it worked small above them.

Saskia did a thing to the mechanism — a setting, a readying, some small attention of the maintainer's hands that Adaeze did not follow and was not meant to — and stepped back, and said, "It is ready. It will take your hands now. When both hands are seated, it asks — it does not speak; it is not that kind of machine; but there is a moment,

a catch, a place where it waits, where it has taken your hands and not yet done the thing, where you can still take them out. It will wait there as long as you hold still. It does not hurry. Nothing about it hurries. When you press — when you decide — you will press down, both hands, into the hollows, all the way, and that is the deploying, and it cannot be undone, there is no second one, you know this. Until you press, you may take your hands out, and we will go up, and it will not have happened, and no one will ask you why, and that will also have been a choice, and we will honour it the same." She paused. "I will be at the foot of the stair. Therèse will be with you. I would rather not watch. It is not squeamishness. It is that I think a thing this private should have as few eyes as it can. Henri would understand. He never watched either, he said; he only ever maintained the room and stood at the foot of the stair; he said the watching was a kind of taking. So I will not take it from you. I will be at the stair."

And she went, up into the dark, and it was Therèse and Adaeze and the lock.

"You don't have to say anything," Therèse said. "I want you to know that. There is no speech required. The form is signed. Whatever you do now you do in your own silence; no one needs your reasons; your grandmother built it so that you would not have to justify it to anyone, not even to us, not even to me. You may put your hands in and press and never tell a living soul why. You may take your hands out and walk up the stair and never tell a living soul why. The why is yours. It is the one thing in the whole world that is entirely and only yours. I will not ask for it. I will not ask for it afterward. I will be here, and then it will be done, or not done, and then we will go up, and I will make you tea, and I

will never, as long as I live, ask you why. That is my promise. It is the only thing I have to give you that is worth anything, the not-asking, and I give it to you now, with my whole heart, such as the work has left of it."

Adaeze stood in front of the lock.

She thought of the child in the yellow raincoat, reading in a language she did not know, in a corner no one guarded, given permission so complete she had not noticed receiving it.

She thought of the researcher, who would file the best thing she ever made in a drawer and never know why, and of the poet Tomas, watched thirty-one years for the crime of a mind that found a true shape, and of Brigitta's heel coming down on the camera, and of the small flat sound of Henri meeting the floor.

She thought of Hadiya by the river with no tea, saying *be the one who knows she does not know.*

She thought of Karim in the church, the creditor's face, saying *choose as a person, not a procedure,* saying *I hope it ruins you,* saying Leila, who died inside a kindness, not consenting, her consent buried with her wrapped in love.

She thought of Iyanna in the Lagos dark saying *a thing you ask me to keep, I keep,* keeping a box out of love, which is not a vault, which does not outlive the lovers.

She thought of her grandmother casting a ten-year-old's hands forty years early, betting on a granddaughter not yet born, building one free choice into the deepest part of a machine made to take choices away, spending the last clear years of her life so that the debt would be incurred, once, in the light, by someone who saw the creditor's face — *you exist because I did not know.*

She thought: both of them are right. Therèse is right and Karim is right and they do not cancel and there is no place to stand where it resolves and I have to choose anyway, in the dark, with both of them true, and live with it.

She thought: whatever I do, I do not get to know if it was right. That is the inheritance. That is the only real one. The blood was never the inheritance. The freedom is.

She put her hands in the hollows.

The right hand fit. The one with the comma-scar settled into the cool brass and wood as though the lock had been, all those forty years in the dark, not waiting exactly but remembering forward, holding the shape of a hand it had been promised; and here at last it was, received with a kind of recognition, without surprise.

The left hand did not fit.

Not by much. By the width of a life. The hollows had been cast from a ten-year-old's hands forty years ago — her mother's, a child Adaeze had never met, who grew up and taught driving on the Onitsha road and died — on a bet that the line would breed near enough true, that a granddaughter's hand would fall close enough into the shape of the daughter's. And it had, on the right. But the left was a little wrong, the way two people who share a face do not share it exactly: the heel of her hand sat too high, the little finger wanted to splay where the cast asked it to fold, and a ridge of dark brass under the second knuckle met no answering hollow in her, pressing where her mother's bone had not been.

So she adjusted. That was the scene, though no form named it, though her grandmother, building it across forty years, could not have foreseen its shape: a living woman taking her own real and slightly-wrong hand and working it

down into a guess made before she was born — folding the finger that did not want to fold, dropping the heel against the cold ridge of brass, pressing her living hand into the shape of a dead child's, and making herself fit. It was meant to fit and did not quite, and she made it the way you make anything fit that was cut for someone you came from and never were: by giving up the part of the shape that was only yours.

And then both hands were seated, the right by grace and the left by will, and the holding could end.

And there was the catch. There was the place Saskia had named, the moment where it had taken her hands and not yet done the thing, where it waited, not hurrying, nothing about it hurrying, where she could still draw her hands out and go up the stair into the rest of her life and let the season turn and let the door become knowable and pay out the debt in the only coin that was ever real; where she could be Karim's daylight; where she could refuse, the way her grandmother had refused first on the small page, *I do not consent, I have heard everything, the no stands*.

She held there, in the catch, with both hands seated, for a long time.

The room was very quiet. The deep-well silence of the old stone. Above them, she knew, the dome went on being true, the child read in the golden light, the river ran low and bright toward the sea not knowing what day it was; and below all of it, here, at the bottom, in the dark, a woman held her hands in a lock that fit and did not, yet, press.

Therèse did not speak. Therèse had promised not to ask, and she kept the promise even in her breathing, even in her stillness; she stood where she had stood, not closer, not further, the way she had stood behind Adaeze's shoulder the

very first day in the reading room, the not-watching that was a kind of company, the leaving-be that was the whole of her terrible gentleness; and she let Adaeze have it, the catch, the held moment, the last of the freedom; she let her have it the way she let everyone have everything; she did not reach.

Adaeze closed her eyes.

She did not pray, in the church, to the altar; she did not pray now, to the lock; she was not that kind of person and this was not that kind of machine. But she did, in the held moment, with her eyes closed and her hands seated and both right things true and unresolved inside her, do the one thing that was hers, that had always been hers, that was older than most of her teeth: she said, silently, to no one, to her grandmother, to the dark, to the shape of the choice itself, the name she had said at the foot of beds and the heads of staircases and once into the speaker of a radio that she had been certain was listening —

Mama Nneka.

— and then, in her own silence, for her own reasons, which were hers, which no one would ever ask her for, which she would carry without justifying for the rest of her life the way her grandmother had carried the debt and Therèse carried Margriet and Karim carried Leila and the whole world carried, without knowing, the box on the wardrobe and the notebooks in the archive and the lock in the dark —

she pressed.

Both hands. All the way. Down into the hollows that had been waiting for them since before she was born.

There was no sound. She had expected a sound; some great mechanical turning, some answering of brass; there was nothing, or nothing she could hear, only a small settling under her palms, a small giving, the smallest possible

movement, the size of a latch going home, top, bottom; and then a stillness that was different from the stillness before, deeper, final, the stillness of a thing that has been done and cannot be undone, the stillness her grandmother had built across forty years and four lives and a cast of a child's hands, arriving at last, under a keeper's two pressed palms, in the dark, freely, for reasons no one would ever know.

It was done.

She did not open her eyes for a moment. She kept them closed, her hands still in the hollows, pressed, the thing finished under them, and she let herself stay there, in the after, in the first instant of the rest of her life, the woman who had done it, whatever it was, however it would weigh, right or wrong or both or neither, chosen, hers.

Then she opened her eyes, and drew her hands out of the lock. There was a red line across the back of her left hand where the brass ridge had pressed, already fading — the only wound the lock had given her that she could see, and she knew, looking at it, that it was not the wound it had given her, that one being elsewhere, and permanent, and not on the skin. They came out easily now, the holding over, the remembering-forward done, the hollows already, she thought, though it was surely her imagination, already a little less exactly the shape of her hands, as though having received them at last it could begin to forget them — and she straightened, and turned, and Therèse was there, where she had been, not closer, not further, with her face doing the thing it almost never did, the thing it had not quite done at the gate on the first morning, the corners of the mouth, the softening, except that now there was water on it, on the grey composed face of the woman who had not, in Adaeze's hearing, ever raised her voice; Therèse was weeping, silently,

the quiet kind, the kind that is just water and no sound, and she did not wipe it, and she did not look away from it, and she did not say *thank you* and she did not say *I'm sorry* and she did not say *it was right* or *it was wrong* or any of the things that would have taken it from Adaeze; she said nothing at all; she kept her promise; she only looked at Adaeze, and let her tears be on her face, and did the one thing she had not done in the whole season, the thing she had taught Adaeze never to do, the not-touching that was respect:

she reached out, and she took Adaeze's hand, the one with the comma-scar, the hand that had just done the thing, and she held it, in both of hers, in the dark, at the bottom of the world; and she did not let go; and the two of them stood there, the keeper and the keeper, holding on, while above them the dome went on being true and the child went on reading and the river went on running to the sea, not knowing, never to know, what had been done for them or to them, in the dark, by a woman in a sky-coloured cardigan, with both right things true, for reasons that were hers, and would stay hers, forever.

"Come up," Therèse said, at last, very softly. "Come up now. I'll make you tea."

And they went up, out of the round room, past the closed folio, up the three flights of dressed pale stone, into the true dome, into the high indirect light, into the rest of it; and the rain had stopped; and somewhere a child was reading aloud, very quietly, to no one, in a language Adaeze did not know and now, she understood, never would, and it did not matter, it had never mattered, that was the whole point, that the child could read it freely and Adaeze would never need to know what it said; and Adaeze walked up out of the dark

with her hand in Therèse's hand and did not know if she had saved the world or sealed its quietest wrong, and understood that she would never know, and that the not-knowing was not the absence of the answer.

It was the answer. It was the only honest one there was. It was the inheritance, and it was hers, and she carried it up into the light.

Chapter Twenty-Two

What the Failsafe Was

They told her three days later, when the worst of the tiredness had loosened enough that she could hear a thing and keep it, and they told her the way they told her everything, which was completely, with the cost named, in a small room with tea, by a person who would rather she be horrified than comforted.

It was Saskia who told her, with Therèse there, because it was Saskia's to tell now; she was the one who maintained the room; she had spent the three days down in the round chamber with the lock, doing the slow careful reading-of-the-machine that came after a deployment, the way a midwife stays with what comes after the birth, and she came up on the third evening with a particular grey care on her face and asked if Adaeze was well enough to be told a thing, and Adaeze said she was, and Saskia sat down and folded her hands and told her.

"The architecture is rewritten," Saskia said. "It worked. I want to say that first, plainly, before the rest, because the rest is hard and you should have the plain good thing to hold while you hear it. It worked. The re-derivers — their road is closed. Everything they reconstructed from traces, the three legs, the whole patient years of it, it reconstructs a thing that no longer works the way they think it works. We have watched, these three days; Eva has watched; the date in their third leg came and went and nothing happened, nothing

could happen, the lock they were picking is not the lock that is there anymore. They do not know yet. They will work it out, in time, that the thing changed under them, and some of them will despair and some of them will begin again from the beginning, because that is what people do, but the beginning is now forty years away again, more, because what you rewrote is harder than what your grandmother's circle built, it had forty years of their thinking folded into it, you deployed a thing they spent your whole season approaching and you put it back over the horizon. The dome is safe. The child reads. You did the thing it was for. Hold that."

"I'm holding it," Adaeze said. "Tell me the rest."

Saskia was quiet for a moment.

"The lock is keyed to you now," she said.

Adaeze did not, at first, understand. She had pressed; the thing was done; she had assumed — she had not thought about it, in three days of tiredness she had not once thought about it — she had assumed the lock was simply the lock again, rewritten, harder, waiting in the dark for the next forty years the way it had waited the last forty, keyed to whatever it had always been keyed to.

"I don't —"

"The old lock," Saskia said, "was keyed to a cast. Your mother's hands, forty years ago, the bet on the bloodline. A dead thing; a shape in brass; it could be fitted, in principle, by anyone whose hands happened to match the cast, which is why it needed the second criterion, the not-knowing, the innocence, to make sure that the one whose hands fit was also the one who could be trusted to — it was a lock that depended on a guess about hands and a hope about character. The new lock does not depend on a guess. The new lock, the one you wrote when you pressed — the

deployment does not just rewrite the architecture, it re-keys the failsafe, it has to, a machine that could be reset twice is a machine that will be reset incorrectly, your grandmother's principle, the one deployment, only ever one — but 'only ever one' does not mean the lock vanishes. It means the lock now needs a key that cannot be cast, or guessed, or bred for, or cast again. It needs a key that is a particular living person. You. It read your hands when you pressed — not the shape of them, the shape is nothing, the shape was the old way — it read the whole of them, the living whole, the thing that cannot be copied because it is not a shape, it is a life; and it has keyed itself to that; and now the lock that holds the architecture shut is not a cast of a dead child's hands waiting for a guess. It is you. The door is held shut, now, by you. While you live."

The room was very quiet.

"You did not know this," Saskia said. "I want that in the room, said aloud, because it matters and because it is the one thing about all of this that I am angry about, and I am not a person who is angry. You did not know this when you pressed. It is not in the folio. It is not in your grandmother's letters — I have asked Therèse, I have asked Henri by the message we are allowed to send him, it is in none of the pages she left, she did not tell you, and I have spent three days trying to decide whether she did not tell you because she did not know, or because she knew and chose not to, and I have concluded — " Saskia stopped. "I have concluded that I cannot tell, which is, I am learning, the answer to most questions in this work, and I hate it, I have not made my peace with it the way Therèse has, I am younger in this than she is. But you should know that you were not told. You pressed a thing believing it would cost you the knowing —

that was the cost you accepted, the un-knowing, the carrying, the wound that does not close — and it has cost you that, and it has also cost you a thing you did not accept, because you did not know to, and that is not right, and I will not pretend it is right, even though it is done, even though it cannot be undone, even though the dome is safe."

"What does it mean," Adaeze said. Her voice was very level — she noticed how level it was, and noticed herself noticing. *My hands have stopped shaking,* she thought, distantly. *They stopped a long time ago. I am calm. This is probably not a good sign.* "Keyed to me. While I live. What does it mean. In — in days. In a life. What does it actually mean for me."

Therèse answered that one. Saskia let her; it was, Adaeze understood, the part that was Therèse's, the part about what a thing costs a person, because that was the page Therèse carried.

"It means you cannot go far from it," Therèse said. "Not — you are not a prisoner; I want to be careful with that word, after everything; you are not in a cell; you may go where you like. But the lock needs you the way a lighthouse needs its keeper. Not every minute. Not even most minutes. But it must be able to reach you; it must be re-affirmed, by your living hands, at intervals; the intervals are not short, they are months, you will not be chained to the round room, you could go home to your lagoon for a season and come back — we have worked out the intervals, these three days, Saskia has, it is months, not days — but you cannot go where it cannot reach you, and you cannot stop, and you cannot give it to someone else, because it is not keyed to a role or a bloodline anymore, it is keyed to you, only you, and when you — " She did not finish it.

"When I die," Adaeze said.

"When you die," Therèse said, "the lock will need to be re-keyed, which means the failsafe will need to be deployed again, which it cannot be, because there is only ever one — and so before you die, in the natural order, with warning, in the slow way, there will have to be — your grandmother built one free choice and you have spent it, and the next one cannot be built the same way, but a thing will have to be done, near the end of your life, to pass the holding to whatever comes next, and we do not know what that is yet, no one knows, it has never happened, you are the first, you are the only, you are the whole of the precedent there will ever be. You have not just kept the door. You have become the hinge it swings on. For the rest of your life. And we did not tell you, and you chose it without choosing it, and that — that is the thing I will carry about you, Adaeze, that is my Margriet now, my new one, the keeper from Lagos who closed the folio on her way down and pressed a thing freely for reasons she would not say and did not know, could not have known, that she was pressing herself into the lock as she did it, sealing herself in with the silence, becoming the thing she chose to keep."

Adaeze sat with it.

She found, sitting with it, that she was not surprised, and she examined the not-surprise, turned it over, and understood it, and it was this: that she had known, in some wordless place, since the lock-room, since she had held her hands an inch above the hollows and felt them fit, that you do not put your living hands into a thing this old and this hungry and take them back out unchanged; that a lock that has waited forty years in the dark for one particular set of hands does not, when they finally arrive, simply let them go;

that the fitting was always going to be a kind of marriage, the hands and the hollows, and that some part of her had pressed knowing — not the mechanism, not the months, not the lighthouse — but knowing, in the body, below where knowing happened, that she was not going to walk up those stairs as a woman who had operated a machine. She was going to walk up as a woman who had joined one.

She asked the practical questions then, the ones that were the actual size of a life, because the large ones — the hinge, the holding, the becoming — were too big to hold, and the practical ones were where she would have to live.

"Can I go home," she said.

"For seasons," Saskia said. "Months at a time. You can be in Lagos most of a year and come back. Not forever. But a great deal of forever, in pieces."

"The otters."

"You can keep them." Saskia hesitated. "But not the way you did. There will be a shadow on it now — a reason you have to leave that you cannot give Eze, or the children; a season that ends not because the work is done but because a lock in the dark needs your living hands. You will be a keeper of otters with another keeping underneath it, always, that no one at the sanctuary will ever be allowed to see. You will be, at your own gate, a little bit the woman in the grey coat now. I am sorry. I thought you should have that one plainly."

Adaeze took it. It went in slowly, the way the cold had gone into Karim.

"And the Repository," she said. "The dome. If I came back — not as this, not as the hinge — could I sit in it and read a book in a language I did not know, in a corner no one guarded, and just be one of them. One of the ones it is for."

Therèse answered that one, because she had seen it coming, and because it was the cruelest of them, and she would not make Saskia carry it.

"No," she said. "Not the way you mean. You may enter it; you will, often; it is above your own room now. But you will never again be a reader in it. The child in the raincoat gets the dome because she does not know there is a door under the floor; that is the whole of the gift; and you cannot un-know it. You gave that up the morning you read the folio and could not unread it. The Repository is the one building in the world that can no longer be true for you — because you are the reason it is still true for everyone else. That is the loss under all the other losses. I did not want to be the one to say it. But you asked the keeper's question, and you have earned the keeper's answer, which is the true one."

"My grandmother," Adaeze said. "Did she know. You said you couldn't tell. I'm asking what you think. Not what you can prove. What you think."

Therèse and Saskia looked at each other.

"I think she knew," Therèse said, quietly. "I have thought about little else for three days. I think she knew, and I think she did not tell you, and I think — Adaeze, I think it was the last and worst and most honest thing she did, and I think it is of a piece with everything else she did, and I am going to tell you why I think it, and then you can hate her if you need to, or me, or all of us, and you would be right to, and I will not stop you.

"She built one free choice. We have said this. The whole machine takes choices away and she built, into the deepest part of it, one free choice for one free person. But think about what 'free' has to mean, for it to be real. A choice you make knowing it will cost you nothing is not free; it is

shopping. A choice you make knowing it will cost you everything — that is the only kind that is actually free, because it is the only kind where the choosing is the whole of what you are spending; there is nothing else in it; just the bare act of deciding, with your whole self on the table.

"If she had told you that pressing would key the lock to you, would make you the hinge, would cost you your freedom of movement and your ordinary death and bind you to the dark for the rest of your life — then you would have been choosing *that,* weighing *that,* a known price, a transaction, *do I accept these terms.* And that is not what she wanted to give you. She did not want to give you a transaction. She wanted to give you the thing she never had, the thing none of us who came up through the cellar ever had: a choice that was pure, that was only the choosing, that was you standing in front of the two right things with nothing in your hands but your own freedom, and pressing, or not, for no reason you could be made to justify and no price you had been quoted. She made you blind to the cost so that the choice would be free of the cost, so that it would be the one clean free human choice in the whole forty years, hers, given to you, and the gift was the blindness, the gift was that you got to choose without the weighing, the way no one since the first morning of the world has gotten to choose anything that mattered.

"It is monstrous. It is the most loving thing I have ever heard of. They are the same thing. You know they are the same thing. You have known it the whole season; it is the only thing this whole season has been trying to teach you; the kindest thing and the theft are one thing with two names, and she did it to you, at the end, with the last of her cunning, from inside the ground: she stole your informed consent and

called it freedom and she was, God help us all, *not wrong,* because you did choose freely, you chose more freely than any person has ever chosen anything, you chose with literally everything on the table and none of it shown to you, and now you will pay for it for the rest of your life, and the paying is the proof that the choosing was real."

Adaeze was quiet for a long time.

Outside the small window the light was going, the long northern evening coming down at last toward a dark it would, this far into the year, barely reach.

"So I'm her," Adaeze said, at last. "I'm — I did to myself what she did to the world. I kept a thing from myself, lovingly, for my own good, so that I could be free, and the keeping was the theft, and I'll never know if it was right, and I can't undo it, and I have to live inside it now. I'm the whole book. I'm the dome and the room. I'm the kind concealment. She made me into the exact thing the door is, so that the person holding the door would finally, for once, *be* the thing she was holding. That's — " She made the small broken sound that was half a laugh. "That's the most thorough thing anyone has ever done to anyone. She didn't just make me keep the door. She made me understand it from the inside by making me *it*. I'm the one who doesn't get to know now. I'm Leila. I'm the researcher. I'm Iyanna, kept from knowing for my own good. I did it to myself. Freely. She made sure I'd do it to myself freely."

"Yes," Therèse said.

"Is there tea," Adaeze said.

"There is always tea," Therèse said, and got up, and made it, at the small kettle in the small room, three cups, the procedure that was the kettle, the hands that needed a small kind thing to do so that they would believe they were still

kind hands; and she brought it, and they drank it, the three of them, the maintainer and the keeper and the one who had become the lock, in the small room, in the failing northern light, while below them in the dark the rewritten architecture held, keyed now to a living woman who would carry it home to a lagoon for a season and come back, and home again, and back, on the months-long tether of it, for the rest of a life that had, in the pressing, stopped being entirely her own and become, also, the world's, without the world ever knowing, the way it never knew anything, the way it was kept from knowing, lovingly, for its own good, by a woman in a sky-coloured cardigan who now knew, from the inside, exactly what that cost, because she was, now, herself, the keeping.

She drank her tea.

It was good tea. André would have been pleased. She thought, with the part of her that was already, she could feel it, beginning the long work of carrying this the way the others carried theirs — she thought: *I will have to tell Iyanna something true. Not all of it. I will never be able to tell her all of it; that is more permanent now than it has ever been; I am the door now, and the door does not get told and does not tell. But I will tell her a true thing. I will tell her I cannot come home for good. I will tell her I can come for a season, and then must go, and come again, and that I cannot say why, and that it is not a training, and that I have chosen it, and that I do not know if it was right, and that I am hers anyway, in the seasons I can be, which is more than Therèse got with Margriet, which is more than Karim got with Leila, which is more than my grandmother got with any of us, which is, in fact, the whole of what there is, which is some of the time, freely given, with the truth*

that can be carried and the silence that cannot, between two sisters, in a house by a lagoon, for as long as we both live.

It was not nothing.

It was, she was beginning to understand, going to have to be enough.

It was going to have to be enough the way the soup was true and not good, the way the choice was free and not clean, the way the world was kind and not innocent, the way her grandmother was loving and not forgivable, the way she herself was now free and not unbound, saved and not safe, the keeper and the kept, the question and, God help her, for the rest of her life, also the answer she would never be allowed to read.

She finished the tea. She set the cup down. She did the latch on it, without deciding to, two fingers to the warm side of it, top, bottom, the ritual that kept the gate from forgetting it was a gate; and this time she let herself do it, the small old hers thing, because she had earned it back, because the hands that had pressed the lock were allowed, now, to be a keeper's hands again, doing the small kind thing, here, in the light, with the people who were as close to home as anything north of the lagoon was ever going to be.

"All right," she said.

And it was not agreement, and it was not absolution, and Therèse, who knew the difference, and Saskia, who was learning it, said nothing at all, and let her have it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Council

They met in a room that was, of all the rooms she had been in that season, the most ordinary, and Adaeze understood by now that this was not an accident; that the Custody put its gravest things in its plainest rooms on purpose; that a body which had learned what it could do had decided, somewhere in its first years, that it would never again let itself feel important, because feeling important was the first of the small permissions, the first yes, the start of the drift. So they met in a room that might have been the back office of a modest insurance concern: a long table not quite long enough, mismatched chairs, a window onto a courtyard, a radiator that ticked, and tea things on a tray in the corner that someone had clearly just used and not quite tidied.

There were five of them, and Adaeze knew none of them, and understood that this was the whole of the Council that touched the closed half of the fifth thing — not a parliament, not a chamber, five tired people who had come, some of them, a long way, by ordinary transport, to sit in a plain room and do a thing they did perhaps once in a working life. Two she placed as very old, older even than Solveig; one was a woman of middle age with a hearing aid and a cardigan worse than Therèse's; one was a man who had the specific stoop of someone who had spent decades bent over either a desk or a sickbed; and one was younger than Adaeze had expected, younger than herself, a person who could not have

been doing this more than a few years and who watched Adaeze with the particular hunger of someone still new enough to be looking for the thing in the veterans' faces that would tell her how to bear it.

Therèse was not at the table. Therèse stood at the wall, by the tea things, with Saskia, the two of them present as — Adaeze had asked, and been told — as witnesses, as the ones who had carried her here, with no vote, no voice, here only so that Adaeze would have, in the room, two faces she knew. It was, she understood, a kindness arranged in advance, and she was grateful for it, and she did not look at them too often, because looking at them too often would have been leaning, and she had decided to do this standing on her own.

For a moment, before any of it began, they were only that: five tired people in a plain room at the end of a day's travelling. One of the very old ones was blowing, from pure habit, on tea that had gone cold an hour before. The stoop-shouldered man had a canvas bag by his chair, the kind you pack a clean shirt in when you are too old to assume you will sleep in your own bed. The hearing-aid woman had reading glasses pushed up into her grey hair and the settled patience of someone who has sat in a great many rooms like this one and knows that the gravity arrives when it arrives and cannot be hurried by sitting up straighter. They did not look like the people who decided whether the world got to keep its quietest secret. They looked like a committee that had stayed too late and would, when this was over, go and find an indifferent dinner somewhere near a station. That, Adaeze understood, was the whole point of them. A body that let itself look important would have begun, long ago, to believe that it was.

The old man with the stoop spoke first.

"We cannot thank you," he said. "I want to begin there, because it is the truest thing in the room and the most useless, and you should have it anyway. We cannot thank you. There is no record in which we can thank you; there is no ceremony; there will be no — you understand that there can be nothing, that you will receive nothing, that no one will ever know, that the histories that get written will not contain you, that you have done the largest thing any single person has done in the forty years of this body and that the doing of it must, by its own nature, be the most completely unwitnessed act of the age. We cannot even thank you properly here, in this room, because thanks would imply that we had the standing to be grateful on behalf of the eight billion, and we do not, they did not appoint us, they do not know we exist, we cannot be grateful in their name. So I can only thank you in my own. Which is nothing. Which is one old man's nothing. I give it to you anyway. Thank you. It is the most expensive worthless thing I have ever said."

"Thank you," said the woman with the hearing aid, simply.

"Thank you," said one of the very old ones, and the other only inclined her head, slowly, the way Solveig had, the greeting and the gratitude of people who had learned to put a great deal into very small movements because the large ones had all been used up.

The young one did not say thank you. The young one said, in a rush, as though she had been holding it and could not any longer: "I don't know how you did it. I have been here four years and I have read everything and I sat in on — I have done the small refusals, the Tuesdays, and they have nearly — and I do not know how you walked down those stairs and put your hands in and I do not think I could have

and I am supposed to be one of the ones who can," and then she stopped, scarlet, and the woman with the hearing aid put a hand briefly over the young one's hand on the table, and the old man with the stoop said, not unkindly, "She is new. We were all, once, the one who says the true thing too loudly. It passes. It is a pity that it passes, but it passes," and the young one looked at the table.

"I didn't know how I did it either," Adaeze said, to the young one, because the young one was the only one she could find words for. "I still don't. I don't think knowing how is the thing. I think I did it the way you feed an animal that might bite you. You don't know how. You just keep your hand steady and you do it because it has to be done and the not-doing is worse, and afterward your hand shakes, or it doesn't, and either way the animal is fed. That's all I have. I'm sorry it's not more. Everyone keeps wanting me to have a how and I don't have one. I had a grandmother and a sister and a lock that fit my hands and I pressed it. That's the whole of the how."

The young one looked at her with something that was either gratitude or heartbreak or both, and wrote nothing down, because there was no record, because there was never, in the rooms that mattered, a record.

Then the woman with the hearing aid, who was, Adaeze had begun to understand, the one who actually ran the meeting, the way Solveig had actually run the other one, drew a breath and changed the temperature of the room, gently, the way they all did everything.

"We have to talk to you about what you are now," she said. "It is the reason we came. The thanks we could have sent; the thanks are easy, even when they are worthless; we could have sent the thanks in an envelope, if envelopes could

hold them. We came in person because of the other thing, the thing Saskia found in the machine, which you have been told, which is that the lock is keyed to you, to your life, and that this changes what you are, permanently, and that you did not choose it, and that we owe you — not thanks, this time; a decision; we owe you a decision, or rather we owe you the making of one, which is harder.

"You are bound to the thing now. We cannot unbind you; there is no unbinding; that is the nature of it. But how you are bound — the shape of the rest of your life around the binding — that is not yet decided, and we will not decide it for you, we have learned that much, we have learned it partly from you, we will not decide it the way the door decides things, in the dark, for your own good.

"So. We are going to put three shapes in front of you. And then we are going to leave you until morning, because nothing this size should be decided in the room where it was named, and you have had enough of being asked things in the rooms where they are named."

"All right," Adaeze said.

"The first shape," the woman said, "is that you become one of us. Formally. Fully. You are inducted; you take the — there is no oath, we do not have oaths, oaths are a way of feeling important; you take the work; you become a keeper of the closed half, with everything that means.

"You would learn what Therèse knows. You would do the Tuesdays. You would, in time, sit where we are sitting. You would have the rooms you do not live in, near the work, and the coat, if you wanted the coat, and you would never again be alone in the way you have been alone this season, because you would be among the only people on earth who know what you know, and that is a kind of company that nothing

else can give, and it is the company that this old man and I and these others have lived inside for our whole lives, and it is real, and it is not nothing, and it is also — " she paused " — it is also Margriet. You understand. We saw you learn it. It is the company of the cellar, and the price of the company of the cellar is everyone outside it, slowly, over years. That is the first shape. You become us. You are not alone, and you lose the lagoon."

"The second shape," said the old man with the stoop, "is that you do not become us. You go home. You go back to your lagoon and your sister and your otters and you live, as nearly as the binding allows, an ordinary life — and the binding allows a great deal of it, more than you may fear; the intervals are long; you could be a keeper of otters who, a few times a year, goes away on a — on a training — " he did not smile but something in the room did, briefly, painfully " — and comes back, and no one in Lagos need ever know that the away is what it is. We would arrange it. Quietly. The way we arrange everything.

"You would be watched — I will use the word, because you have earned the word, because you of all people should not be lied to with a softer one — you would be watched, the way we watch the ones we must, gently, at the edge, all your life, because you are now load-bearing and load-bearing things are watched; but you would be watched in your own home, among your own people, in your own life, which is more than most of the watched ever get, which is more than the poet got, who at least did not know.

"You would know. You would live an ordinary life that you knew was being held at the edges, and you would go away a few times a year to the dark and come back to the light, and you would carry the whole of it alone, because you

could tell no one, not even your sister, especially not your sister. That is the second shape. You keep the lagoon, and you are alone inside it forever."

There was a silence. The radiator ticked.

"Those are the two we have," the woman with the hearing aid said. "They are the only two the body has ever had, for anyone; they are *us* and *watched*; in forty years we have never needed a third, because in forty years everyone who came to us came already from inside one of them — they were already ours, or they were already someone we watched.

"You are the first who is neither. You came from outside, clean, with the lagoon on you, and you did the thing freely, and now you do not fit either shape, because both shapes were made for people the cellar had already chosen, and the cellar did not choose you, your grandmother did, forty years early, for exactly this, I think — I have come to think, these last days — for exactly this moment, so that there would be, once, someone standing in this room who did not fit our two shapes and might therefore be able to imagine a third. We cannot imagine it. We have tried, the five of us, on the train, in the night; we are too far inside; we have been us or watching for too long to think of anything that is not us or watching."

One of the very old ones spoke then, without opening her eyes — she had closed them somewhere in the last hour, the way the very old gather what they have left: "All night on the train, the five of us. Nothing. We made the world and cannot, it turns out, imagine a way to let it keep the one who saved it." A pause. "Mind you do better than us. You have the one advantage we have spent. You are not yet too tired to think."

"But you are not too far inside. You are, for one more night, still partly outside, still partly the keeper from the lagoon, and we are going to ask you the thing we have never once, in forty years, asked anyone, because we have never had anyone we could ask it of:

"Is there a third shape? Not for the door — the door is decided, you have decided it, it is shut and it is keyed to you and that is done. For *you*. For what you are, now, in the world. We have *us,* and we have *watched*. You have until morning. If there is a third thing, you are the only person who has ever lived who might be able to see it, because you are the only person who has ever stood exactly here, having done exactly that, still smelling, however faintly, of somewhere that is not this. Go and see if there is a third thing. And if there is not — if you come back in the morning and tell us there are only the two — we will believe you, and we will honour whichever of the two you choose, and that will also have been worth asking, because it will have been asked, this once, of someone free enough to answer."

Adaeze looked at the five tired people in the plain room.

"You're asking me," she said slowly, "to invent the thing I'm allowed to be."

"Yes," the woman with the hearing aid said. "We are. It is the last unfair thing we are going to do to you, and it is, I think, also the first wholly fair one, and I cannot tell you which it is more of, and neither, I suspect, can you, and that — " the smallest movement, not a smile, the thing under a smile " — that not-being-able-to-tell is how you will know you are one of us now whether you take the first shape or not. You have caught it. I am sorry. It is not curable. Go and not-sleep on it. We will be here in the morning. There is tea, if you want it, before you go. There is always tea. It is the one

thing this body has ever been unambiguously good at."

And Adaeze stood, and crossed to the corner where the tea things were, where Therèse and Saskia stood, and the three of them made tea together in the plain room while the five tired keepers of the world watched, not unkindly, two of them already half-asleep in their mismatched chairs; and Adaeze carried a cup to each of the five, with both hands, the way she had learned, the way you do, because the hands need a small kind thing to do and because it was the only thanks she had that was worth anything and could be given without a record; and she set the last cup down in front of the young one, who looked up at her, still scarlet, still new, still looking for the thing in the older faces, and Adaeze said, very quietly, just to her:

"You could have done it. Don't believe them that you couldn't. They only say that because believing they're special is how they bear having done it. You could have. That's the terrible thing. Anyone good enough to be in this room is good enough to do it, and good enough to be ruined by it, and the ones who do it are just the ones whose turn it was. It was my turn. It might be yours, someday, some other door, some other lock. I hope it isn't. But if it is — your hand will shake or it won't, and either way the animal gets fed, and you'll be all right, the way they're all right, which is to say not at all, and completely, both, forever. Drink your tea. It's the procedure. It's the whole procedure, in the end. It's the only one that works."

And she left them, the five and the two, in the plain room with the ticking radiator, and went out into the long northern evening that did not get dark, to walk, and to not-sleep, and to see, by morning, whether there was a third thing — whether a keeper from a lagoon, standing for one

last night half-outside the only world that now held her, could imagine a shape that forty years of the gentlest, most careful, most ruined people on earth had never once been free enough to see.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Third Thing

She walked all night, in the not-dark, along the low bright river that did not know what day it was, past the third bridge and the willows where Hadiya had sat with no tea, past the church where Karim had been the creditor's face, past the long pale shoulder of the Repository that held, under its true dome, the lock that was now keyed to her living hands; and somewhere in the grey-gold middle of the night, with her feet aching and the four papers over her heart, she found the third thing, and it was not a clever thing, and it did not resolve anything, and she knew, the moment she found it, that it was right, and she knew, in the same moment, that right was not the same as safe, and that she was about to offer the gentlest, most careful people on earth the one thing they had spent forty years making sure no one could ever propose.

In the morning she told them.

They were in the plain room again, the five of them, looking as though some of them had slept and some had not, with fresh tea on the tray and the radiator ticking, and they waited, and Adaeze stood, because she had decided to stand, and she said:

"There isn't a third shape for me. You were right about that. There's *us* and there's *watched,* and I don't fit either, and I can't make a third one for myself out of nothing, because anything I make for myself alone is just one of your

two shapes with a different coat on. If I go home and you watch me, that's *watched,* however gently. If I stay and learn the work, that's *us*. There's no third shape for one person. I looked all night. There isn't one."

The woman with the hearing aid nodded, slowly, with something that was almost relief and almost grief, the look of someone whose worst expectation has been confirmed and who had, despite everything, hoped.

"But there's a third thing," Adaeze said. "It's not for me. That's why I couldn't find it at first — I kept looking for a shape for *me,* and there isn't one, because the problem was never me. The problem is the silence. The second door. The one my grandmother could never close right. I can't fix what I am. But I think I can change what the silence is, a little, and I think changing it is the only thing that makes what I am bearable, and I think you are going to hate it, and I think you should do it anyway, and I'm going to tell you why."

She set her hands flat on the not-quite-long-enough table.

"You keep two doors welded into one. The knife-door and the silence-door. The knife-door I'd build again; I did build it again; it's mine now, literally, it's keyed to my hands, I'm not arguing about the knife-door. The knife stays out of the basement. Good. But the silence-door — the part that keeps the world from knowing there *is* a door — that one you weld to the first one and tell yourselves they can't come apart, that you can't let anyone know the door exists without telling them what's behind it, that knowing-there's-a-room and knowing-what's-in-the-room are the same knowing. And they're not. That's the thing I found, walking. They are not the same.

"You have spent forty years acting as though *that there is a locked room* and *what is in the locked room* are one secret,

and they are two, and you have kept them both because keeping them both was easier and safer and because no one ever made you pull them apart, and I am made, I am specifically and deliberately made, by my grandmother, forty years early, out of her own blood, to be the one person free enough to stand in this room and make you pull them apart."

"Adaeze," the old man with the stoop said, very quietly, and it was not a question, it was almost a plea, the sound of a man who could see where a sentence was going and could not stop it and was not sure he wanted to.

"Tell them there's a door," Adaeze said. "Not what's behind it. Never what's behind it; I've read what's behind it; I'd press the lock again to keep it behind it; I am the last person who would open the knife-door.

"But tell them the door *exists*. Tell the world — all of it, the eight billion, the child in the raincoat, the next Leila, my sister — tell them that there is one room, under the library, that is not free, so that the rest can be; that there is a door humanity does not open; that it is held; and that it is held by a *named person,* who can be asked about it, who is accountable for the fact of it, who stands in the light and says *yes, there is a door, and I keep it, and I will not tell you what is behind it, and you may hate me for that, and you may argue about it, and you may spend a hundred years arguing about it, and the arguing will not open the door because the door is keyed to my hands and I will not open it — but you will know. You will know there is a door. You will know who holds it. You will never again be a Leila who dies inside a kindness not knowing she was weighed. You will know you were weighed. You will know there is a scale. You will not be told what's on the other pan — that's the knife, that stays secret — but you will be told there is a scale, and*

a hand on it, and the hand has a name, and the name will answer you."

The room was utterly silent. Even the radiator seemed to have stopped.

"That's the third thing," Adaeze said. "A Keeper. Named. Public. Accountable for the *existence* of the door, never its contents. Someone the world knows is holding something back, and knows the name of, and can shout at, and can put on trial in the court of every dinner table on earth, forever, without ever being able to make them open it.

"You'd still have your silence — the real silence, the only one that matters, the what's-behind-it. You'd give up the other silence, the that-it-exists silence, which was never keeping the knife from the child, which was only ever keeping *you* from having to be looked at. And I think — I think the debt my grandmother wrote about, the one owed to the people who don't know, the one she said could never be paid — I think this is the first payment. Not the whole debt. You can't pay the whole debt; the whole debt is *what's behind the door* and paying it would open the door and kill everyone. But you can pay *this* much: you can stop adding to it. You can stop the part where they don't even know they're owed. You can let them know there's a debt, and a creditor, and a face, even if you can never tell them the sum.

"It's almost nothing. It's the difference between Leila dying not knowing and Leila dying knowing. Karim spent thirty years and an old man's skull for exactly that difference, and he was wrong about the method and right about the difference, and the difference is real, and it's the only thing I have to offer that pays anything at all, and it costs you nothing that the knife-door needs. It only costs you the being unlooked-at. It only costs you the comfort."

The room did not move. On the tray the fresh tea had gone quiet, the steam off it thinning to nothing while she spoke; no one had reached for a cup. The radiator ticked once, into the silence, and seemed almost embarrassed by the sound.

"It costs more than that," said one of the very old ones, the one who had only inclined her head before, and her voice was a dry thread, and the room turned to her because she so rarely spent it. "Child. You are clever and you are right and you are also young in this, a season young, and I am going to tell you what it costs, because someone in this room has to, and the others love you too much now to say it."

She paused, and in the pause the radiator ticked, and the old man with the stoop looked down at the table, because he could not look at her, because she was saying the thing he had not been able to say and was right to say it and he could not bear that she was right.

"A door that is known to exist is a door that will, someday, be opened. Not by you. You are keyed to it; you will not open it; I believe you. But you will die. We have established that you will die; it is the whole of why we are here. And a hundred years of every dinner table on earth arguing about a door they know exists and cannot open — that is a hundred years of pressure on a door that used to have no pressure on it at all, because no one knew to push. You will have taught them to push.

"Gently, in the light, accountably, with a name to shout at — but you will have taught eight billion people that there is a door, and people do not, in the end, leave doors alone, it is not in us, we are the animal that opens the door, it is the first story we ever told ourselves, the garden and the fruit and the woman who had to know — and you will have turned the one

door no one was pushing on into the most pushed-on door in history, and you will be dead, and your successor, whoever and however that terrible problem is solved, will inherit not a quiet lock in the dark but a lock with the whole weight of a knowing world leaning on it, forever, harder each year.

"That is what it costs. Not your comfort. The next thousand years of someone holding a door that everyone, now, knows is there to be held. You will have made the keeping honest. You will also have made it, eventually, impossible. And you will not be alive to see which came first."

Adaeze took this. She did not flinch from it. She had learned, this season, not to flinch from the true thing.

"Yes," she said. "That might be true. I can't prove it isn't. You can't prove it is. That's — that's the whole shape of everything down here, isn't it; that's what you all are; two true things that should cancel and don't.

"Maybe a known door gets opened in a thousand years. Maybe a secret door gets *re-derived* in forty — it nearly just did; that's why I'm keyed to a lock right now; the secret didn't keep it safe, the secret nearly lost it, a season ago, a boy with a camera nearly put it on every screen on earth and the only reason he didn't was an old man's body and a woman's heel, and you call that safe?

"The secret is not safe. The secret was never safe. The secret just *felt* safe because the pushing was invisible. At least a known door, you can see who's pushing. At least a known door, when the pressure builds, you'll know, you'll have a hundred years of warning instead of a season, you'll see it coming in the arguments at the dinner tables instead of finding out from a preprint that the season is already turning. I'm not telling you it's safe. Nothing is safe. I'm

telling you it's *honest,* and that I think, after this season, honest might be the only kind of safe that lasts, because the other kind, the kind built on no one knowing, that kind ends the day someone knows, and someone always, finally, knows. My grandmother knew the silence was a debt. I'm telling you how to make the first payment. I'm not telling you it won't bankrupt you eventually. Everything bankrupts you eventually. At least pay something, while you can, to the people you're charging."

The radiator ticked. On the tray the tea had gone cold, all five cups poured and forgotten — the one thing this body was unambiguously good at, forgotten, this morning, for the first time in Adaeze's experience of them.

The five of them looked at each other.

And Adaeze saw, watching them, that they were divided — that it was not five against her, it had never been five against her, it was the argument itself splitting them down the middle the way it had split her, the way it had split her grandmother, the way it split everyone real who got near it; she could see it on their faces, the woman with the hearing aid already half-persuaded and frightened of being persuaded, the very old one who had spoken set hard against it and grieving that she was set hard against it, the old man with the stoop with his eyes closed and his lips moving slightly as though doing a sum that would not come out, the second very old one unreadable, and the young one — the young one looking at Adaeze with open naked hope, the hope of the new, the one not yet ruined, the one for whom the idea that the work could be made *honest* was a rope thrown to a person who had not known, until this moment, that she was drowning.

"We will have to consider it," the woman with the hearing aid said, at last, and her voice was not steady, and she did not pretend it was. "You understand that we cannot — this is not a thing five tired people decide in a plain room over tea in a morning. This is the largest question the body has faced since its founding. It may be larger. The founding only built the door. You are proposing to — to *open the curtain,* not the door, the curtain, to let the world see the shape of the thing through the curtain even if never the thing itself, and that is — there are people not in this room who would have to be part of deciding it, and there are arguments not yet made, and there is the simple fact that we are frightened, all of us, in different directions, and frightened people should not decide the largest thing on the morning they were frightened.

"We will consider it. We will consider it for — I do not know how long. Longer than you will want. Perhaps longer than you will be — perhaps a long time. And we may decide no. I want you to hear that clearly, because you have earned clarity: we may consider your third thing for years and decide, in the end, no, and keep the silence whole, both doors, the way we always have, and if we do, you will still be keyed to the lock, you will still have to choose between *us* and *watched,* and your beautiful honest third thing will have been only a thing a tired woman proposed once, in a plain room, that frightened five people and changed nothing.

"That is a real possible ending. I will not lie to you and say we will be brave. We are not brave. We are careful. Careful and brave are not the same and you have just asked the careful people to be brave and we do not know if we can and I will not promise you that we can."

"I know," Adaeze said. "I'm not asking you to be brave. I'm asking you to consider it. That's all. That's the whole of what I'm asking. Consider it. Take your years. I'll be — I'll be wherever I am, keyed to the lock, coming and going on the tether, *us* or *watched,* whichever I pick, and you'll consider it, and maybe one year you'll decide, and maybe you'll decide no, and maybe I'll be dead before you decide anything, and the curtain will still be shut, and the whole thing will have been a conversation in a plain room. I know. I've made my peace with the maybe. I made it on the river. The maybe is the inheritance.

"I just — I had to say it. I had to be the one who said, out loud, once, in this room, to the people who could change it: *there is another way to carry the debt, and it is honest, and it is dangerous, and here it is.* My grandmother made me free for one choice and I spent the choice on the lock. This isn't a choice. This is just — this is me using the last of the outside, the last of the lagoon still on me, before it wears off and I'm only ever us or watched, to say the thing none of you were free enough to say.

"That's what she made me for. Not just to press the lock. To say this, after. I'm sure of it now. She built one free person so that, once, the door would be operated by someone who could also, afterward, turn around and tell you it didn't have to be carried in total darkness. I've pressed the lock and I've said the thing. That's the whole of what I was for. The rest of my life is just the carrying. Consider the third thing. Or don't. I've done the part that was mine."

And she sat down, finally, in one of the mismatched chairs, because her legs had walked all night and were finished, and she was finished, the season was finished, the thing she was for was finished; and the five tired keepers of

the world sat with her in the plain room with the ticking radiator and the cooling tea and the largest unanswered question of the age on the not-quite-long-enough table between them; and no one said anything for a long time; and the morning went on being morning outside the window, ordinary, bright, unknowing; and the question sat there, unanswered, the way it would sit, Adaeze understood, for a long time, perhaps for the rest of her life, perhaps past it, the way the truest questions do; and Therèse, at the wall, by the tea things, with Saskia beside her, looked at Adaeze across the plain room with her grey composed face doing, very slightly, at the corners, the thing it almost never did, and did not say whether it was pride or grief or fear, because she did not know, because no one knew, because the not-knowing was the whole of what there was, and was, Adaeze had finally learned, not the absence of the answer but the answer itself, carried up, every day, into the light.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lagos

She came home in the dry season, on an ordinary flight, in an aisle seat, with one small bag and the sky-coloured cardigan folded into it because Lagos did not need a cardigan, and she came down the steps onto the hot tarmac into the particular light of home, the thick gold afternoon light with the sea somewhere under it, and she stood for a moment at the bottom of the steps with the heat coming up through her sandals and let it be true that she was home, even if home was now a place she had to leave again, even if home had become a place she visited on a tether she could not explain, even if the leaving was already, the moment she landed, counting down somewhere behind her ribs. She was home. The light was the light. The leaving could wait. She had learned, this year, to let the true thing be true for as long as it would hold, before the second true thing arrived to stand beside it.

Iyanna was at the airport, against the rail, in a yellow head-tie, taller in Adaeze's seeing than she ever was in fact, the way the people you have missed are always taller; and she did not wave, because they were not a waving family; she only watched Adaeze come, with the particular attention of a sister, the attention that had read every lie down a phone and every silence in a letter, the attention that was, Adaeze understood now, the closest thing to the Custody's terrible honest watching that love produced on its own, except that

this watching wanted nothing, was owed nothing, was only a woman looking at her sister come home; and when Adaeze reached her Iyanna said, instead of hello:

"You look old."

"I am old."

"You look older than old. You look like Mama looked. The strange look. You've still got it." Iyanna took the small bag off her shoulder, simply, the way she took burdens, without asking, and slung it over her own. "All right. Come. The car's in the bad place, I couldn't afford the good place and I wasn't going to circle. Come. There's food at the house. I cooked, which you should treat as the event it is. The cat is alive. The roof holds. Come home, Adaeze. You can be strange where I can see you now. Come on."

*

They drove home through the city, and the city did what it always did, which was refuse to be anything but completely itself. The traffic was the traffic. A danfo bus with its conductor hanging out of the open side, shouting a destination like a curse and a blessing at once. A woman with a tray of oranges balanced on her head, walking between the stopped cars with the unbothered grace of someone who had done it ten thousand times and would do it ten thousand more. The heat came in the open windows thick enough to lean on, full of exhaust and frying plantain and the green rot-and-bloom of the lagoon — the smell, Adaeze understood, sitting in the passenger seat while her sister swore cheerfully at a truck that would not let her in, of her own actual life, the smell that no grey port-city of careful decisions had ever once produced, not faintly, not even on

its best gold evening. Lagos did not care that she had saved the world. Lagos had a generator to run and a market to feed and a hundred thousand more urgent matters than one tired woman home from abroad. It was the rudest and truest welcome she could have been given. She wound the window all the way down and let the noise in.

The house was the house.

It was so much the house that Adaeze had to stop in the gateway and let it hit her — the verandah, the palms along the lagoon-side wall, the side door that was the family door, the particular angle of the late light on the particular wall, all of it exactly itself, and the roof, the new roof, the honest roof, sitting on top of all of it not calling attention to itself, just keeping the rain out, which was the whole of what a roof was for and the whole of what the year had been about, in its way: things that keep other things, quietly, so that the life underneath can go on not noticing.

And nothing had changed. That was what stopped her in the gateway and held her there — not that things had changed while she was gone, but that they had not. She had been to the bottom of the world and back. She had put her hands into a lock cast before she was born and become the hinge a secret swung on; she had been remade, slowly, into a woman who could sit in a kitchen with an empty chair. And the verandah did not know it. The palms did not know it. The late light fell on the wall exactly as it had fallen on a woman who had not yet done any of it — a year ago, a lifetime ago, a self ago. Home had stayed itself. She was the one who had moved. That was the loneliness no one had warned her of: not that home would be gone when she came back to it, but that it would be exactly, perfectly here, unchanged, waiting, and she would no longer perfectly fit

the shape it had kept for her.

They ate on the verandah, in the cooling evening, the food Iyanna had cooked, which was good, which was not merely true, which was their mother's jollof done the way their mother did it with the extra step nobody wrote down, and Adaeze ate two plates and Iyanna watched her eat them with satisfaction, and the lagoon went its colours, and a child somewhere down the road was being called in, and then again, and then by a parent at a doorway, and then was going in, the way the children always were, the way they always would, and Adaeze sat in it and let it be true.

They did not, that night, talk about the thing. Iyanna had decided, it was clear, that the first night was not for the thing, that the first night was for jollof and the cat and the small news, who had married, who had died, whose nephew had done the roof and done it well; and Adaeze let herself be carried on it, the small news, the ordinary current of a life she had been outside of, and she did not bring the thing, and Iyanna did not ask for the thing, and they went to bed late, in the warm house, with the sea under everything, and Adaeze slept, lying down, all the way through, for the first time in longer than she could remember, the deep dreamless sleep of an animal that has, after a long danger, reached a place its body has decided is safe.

The thing waited for the third day.

*

On the third day, in the afternoon, when the heat had driven them both inside, Iyanna put a shoebox on the kitchen table and sat down and said, "Receipts," and Adaeze understood that the price had come due.

She sat down at the kitchen table.

She did not sit in the mother's chair. The mother's chair was where it had always been, at the head, by the window, the chair she had sat in, and it was empty, the way it was always empty, and Adaeze sat instead in the chair she had always sat in as a child, the one at the side, and Iyanna sat across from her, and between them Iyanna opened the shoebox of receipts for the roof, and the water damage, and the paint, and the small endless costs of keeping a house standing, and she went through them, one by one, in her clear hard voice, this much for the timber, this much for the man, this much for the thing that turned out to also be broken once they opened the wall, the way a thing you fix always reveals the next thing, and Adaeze listened, and looked at each receipt as it was handed to her, and held it, and did the sums, and paid her half, in the proper way, with a transfer Iyanna watched her make on the phone, and it took — Adaeze was aware of the clock, she had been aware of the clock the whole time, she could not not be aware of clocks anymore — it took fifty-one minutes.

Fifty-one minutes at the kitchen table, in the chair that was not the mother's chair, with her sister, going through the receipts.

It was the price. Iyanna had set it on a verandah a year ago — *you will sit at the table with me in the kitchen where the chair she sat in is, and you will look at the receipts, and you will sit there for longer than ten minutes* — and Adaeze had agreed, badly, as a way to escape a conversation, and had carried the debt across the whole year, across the whole season of other people's debts, the researcher's and the poet's and Karim's and the world's, and here at the end of all of it was the only debt she could actually pay in full, in the

proper coin, sitting down, longer than ten minutes, fifty-one minutes, with the receipts, in the chair that was not the chair.

When they had finished, and the receipts were back in the shoebox, Iyanna did not get up. She sat. She looked at the empty chair at the head of the table for a moment, and then she looked at Adaeze, and she said:

"You sat longer than ten minutes."

"You counted."

"Of course I counted. I've been counting for nine years. You were always gone by ten. I used to watch you do it, find the reason, the thing you'd forgotten, the call you had to make, always right around ten minutes, like the chair started to burn you. You didn't do it this time. You sat in it. Fifty-one minutes. I'm not going to pretend I didn't count." Her voice did something. "Something happened to you out there. I don't know what. I decided not to know what. But whatever it was, it — you can sit at the table now. With her chair right there. You couldn't before and now you can, and I don't know if that's the worst thing that ever happened to you or the best, that you can finally sit with the empty chair, but I know it's the thing I wanted, the thing I set the price for, and you paid it, and — " she stopped, and wiped her face, once, hard, with the heel of her hand, the family gesture, the denial of the crying that was the whole of how they cried " — and thank you. That's all. Thank you for sitting down."

*

The box came out on the fourth day.

Adaeze brought it down herself, from the top of the wardrobe in the mother's room, the cedar box, bread-box

sized, the brass catch gone green, the smell of the cedar still in it after forty years, against the insects; and she carried it to the kitchen table, where the receipts had been, and set it down, and the two of them sat — Adaeze in her side chair, Iyanna across — and Adaeze said, "I promised we'd do this together. The box. Whatever's in it. Together, or not at all. So. Together."

And they opened it, and went through it, the way they had said they would the week of the funeral and then never had, two sisters at a kitchen table on a hot afternoon with the cedar smell rising between them, and it was —

— it was only old letters.

That was the thing Adaeze sat with, going through it, the thing that filled her chest so that she had to keep her face still: it was only old letters. Birthday cards. A woman called Felicity who wrote like a queen visiting a colony, and was, it turned out, when you read the letters themselves and not just the signature, also funny, and lonely, and fond of their grandmother in a prickly difficult way that came off the page forty years later still warm; and a man who signed himself Cyprian who had had a bad chest and wrote about his garden and his grandchildren and, once, a long careful paragraph about whether any of it had been worth it that Adaeze read twice and then folded back into its envelope because it was his, because it was over, because it pointed at a machine that no longer existed, because the thing these four people had built and argued about and doubted across forty years of letters was, now, gone, rewritten, keyed to a living woman's hands, and their letters were what Iyanna had always thought they were, what they had become the instant Adaeze pressed the lock: old paper. Charming. Harmless. The correspondence of four dead people who had loved each

other and worried about their chests and their gardens and a thing they could not name, which no longer needed naming, which was safe now, which was over.

She had done that. She had reached into every house in the world where someone kept dangerous paper out of love, and she had turned the paper back into paper, and here was the proof, in her own hands, at her own mother's table: her grandmother's letters were safe to read now, safe to keep, safe to let go, and Iyanna would never know that they had not always been, that there had been a season when this exact box on this exact wardrobe was among the most dangerous objects on earth, that her sister had pressed a lock in the dark partly so that this afternoon could be only what it was — two sisters, old letters, cedar smell, a hot day, nothing at stake, nothing watched, nothing held back except the one thing, the one secret, the what-was-behind-the-door, which Adaeze carried, and would carry, and which did not need to be in this kitchen, which had never needed to be in this kitchen, that was the whole point, that was the whole of what she had bought.

"This one's got the little mark," Iyanna said, holding up a card. "The circle with the line. Hippolytus. There's a few of his. He drew it on everything, look. Like a — what is it, do you think? A no-entry sign? A planet? Mama never said. I asked her once, years ago, what it was, and she did the thing, the not-answering thing, she just said *it's an old joke, nobody remembers,* and changed the subject." Iyanna turned the card over. "Do you know what it is?"

And Adaeze, who knew exactly what it was — the mark of the circle, the architects' mark, the mark above the two palm-hollows in the round room at the bottom of the world, the mark she had pressed her hands beneath, the mark that

meant *this far and no further, this is the line, this is the thing we drew around the thing we would not let through* — Adaeze looked at her sister holding the forty-year-old card with the mark on it in the hot kitchen, and she told her a true thing, which was all she would ever tell her, and which was enough.

"It's a line drawn around something," Adaeze said. "To keep it in. Or to keep everything else out. I think — I think it depends which side of it you're on. I think that's why it's a circle. A circle doesn't have a right side. It just has an in and an out, and the same line makes both, and you don't get to know, from looking at it, whether it was drawn to keep something dangerous in or to keep everyone else safe outside, because it's the same line, it's always the same line, it does both at once."

Iyanna looked at her.

"That's the strange talking again," she said, but gently, and she put the card down, on the keep pile, not the let-go pile, and she did not ask what Adaeze meant, because she had decided, a year ago, not to ask; and Adaeze loved her for it, the not-asking, which was the gift, which was the same gift she had given the world from the bottom of a well, the not-having-to- know, except that Iyanna had chosen hers freely, knowing she was choosing it, which was the one thing the world had not been allowed; and Adaeze thought, looking at her sister, that this was the closest she would ever come to telling anyone, and that it was, in fact, telling her, in the only language that was safe, the language of a line drawn around a thing, and that Iyanna had heard it, all of it, the whole shape of it through the curtain, and had set it down on the keep pile, and had not asked, and that this — this exactly — was the third thing, in miniature, in a kitchen, between

two sisters: not the secret told, and not the secret kept in total darkness, but the *shape* of it acknowledged, the fact of it set on the table between them, the line drawn and named as a line, while what it enclosed stayed, forever, only Adaeze's.

She had been right, on the river, in the night. There was a way to carry it that was not total darkness. She was doing it right now, in a kitchen, with a card with a circle on it, and it did not open anything, and it did not kill anyone, and her sister knew there was a line, and would never know what it enclosed, and that was not nothing.

It was, in fact, everything she had.

*

She went to the sanctuary on the fifth day.

Eze was there, older, and wept, briefly and furiously and with great embarrassment, and then made her look at three months of filtration logs to punish her for having made him weep. The children who were there did not know her; they were new children; the old children had grown, the way children did, into taller children with other concerns; but one of them, a small serious girl of about six, attached herself to Adaeze at the otter enclosure and informed her, with the great authority of the young, of the names and ranks and crimes of all the current otters, and Adaeze listened to the whole catalogue gravely, and learned that Yusuf — her Yusuf, the new male she had ruled upon from abroad, who was not new anymore, who was established, who had a little weathered sign — was, in the estimation of the small serious girl, "the boss, but fair."

"And that one?" Adaeze said. Because there was a new one. At the far end, near the rock that had been Professor's rock, a young female, small, half-grown, not yet settled, watching the water with the particular held-back attention of an animal that has not yet decided whether a place is hers.

"She's new," the girl said. "She came in the rains. She hasn't got a name yet. We can't agree." The girl said *we* the way Tomi had once said it, a year and a lifetime ago, the *we* of the children's endless parliament of naming. "Some of them want Ngozi and some of them want Bisi and there was nearly a fight."

"There's always nearly a fight," Adaeze said. "About the names. There should be. It's the most important thing. You should take your time."

"Did you name them? Before? Miss Eze said you used to work here before you went away to be important."

"I'm not important," Adaeze said. "I went away to do a job. It's a quiet job. You wouldn't have heard of it. It's the kind of job where you keep a gate." She crouched down by the small serious girl and looked through the wire at the new young otter who had not decided yet whether this place was hers. "And no. I didn't name them, mostly. The children named them. The children always named them. That's the rule. The people who'll have to live with the name the longest, they get to choose it. That's only fair. Take your time with hers. She's only just arrived. She doesn't know yet if she's staying. You can't name a thing properly until it knows that."

The young otter, at the far end, turned her head and looked at Adaeze through the wire, the way Professor had looked at her on the last morning, the aristocratic assessing look, the *I see you, I am aware of you, I will require an*

explanation in my own time look; and Adaeze looked back, and did not name her, because it was not hers to name, because she was only visiting, because in some number of weeks the tether behind her ribs would tighten and she would have to go back to the cool round room and put her living hands beneath the circle and remind the lock that she was alive; but for now she crouched by the wire in the hot gold light with a serious child beside her and an unnamed otter deciding whether to stay, and she let it be the whole of what there was: some of the time, freely, in the light, with the people and the animals she loved, and the one secret carried quietly underneath, and the line drawn and known to be a line.

"What was the best one?" the girl asked. "The best name. Ever. That the children did."

Adaeze thought about it. She thought about it seriously, because the question was serious, because names were the most important thing, because naming the kept thing with care was the only proof that the keeper had not become the thing she kept out.

"There was an otter called Professor," she said. "Before your time. He died last year, old, in the sun, on that rock, right there. The children named him Professor and no one ever knew why, it was true before anyone could remember it being decided, the way the best names are. He was — he was very dignified. He made you wait. He ate his fish underwater sometimes, with his eyes closed, like a man in a hot bath." She found she was able to say it without her voice doing the thing; the year had taught her that too, how to carry a grief in the light and still speak. "He was the best one. Professor. But yours will be the best one too, when you find it. That's how it works. The one you name is always the best one.

That's the whole secret of it. Take your time. She'll tell you what she is. You just have to watch her until she does, and then you'll know, and then you'll all stop nearly fighting, and that'll be how you know you've got it right — when the nearly-fighting stops."

And the small serious girl nodded, gravely, taking this in as the important instruction it was, and turned to watch the new otter with the patience of someone who has just been given a sacred task; and Adaeze stood, her knees complaining, an old keeper in the gold light, and looked once more at the unnamed young otter at the far end deciding whether the place was hers, and then she latched the gate she was standing at — without thinking, without deciding, the old way, top, bottom, two fingers to the gate-post, the ritual that kept the gate from forgetting it was a gate — and this time it was the right gate, the right post, the right side, the first time in a year it had been the right side, and her hand knew it, and something in her that had been performing the gesture on wrong posts in foreign countries for a whole season eased, very slightly, at being allowed, at last, to do the true thing in the true place; and she walked back up the path along the inside of the fence, beside the lagoon that was the colour of weak tea, toward Eze and his filtration logs and the rest of the afternoon and the few weeks she had before the tether pulled, and she let it be true, all of it, for as long as it would hold.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Feeding

The fish smelled the way it always smelled.

She carried the bucket along the path that traced the inside of the sanctuary fence, her sandals making the soft slap of leather on concrete, and the smell of the herring went ahead of her like a small announcement, the way it always had, the way it had on the morning the world finished becoming one, more than a year ago now, when she had been a woman who fed otters and voted by post and forgot, who had never read a page she could not unread, whose hands had not yet learned what they fit. It was a different morning. It was the same path. The lagoon was the colour of weak tea. The sea breeze had not yet arrived, and the air sat on her shoulders like a damp shawl, and she would change her shirt before the visitors came, the way she always had, and the otters could hear the bucket from a hundred metres and knew her step on the path, and by the time she reached the enclosure they were at the gate.

She had been back some months. She did not count them out loud. She had gone away once, in the wet, on a quiet job no one in Lagos had heard of, the kind of job where you keep a gate, and had come back; and she would go away again, when the tether tightened, and come back again, for as long as her hands held and her heart held and the lock in the round room at the bottom of the world went on needing the living proof of her; and that was the shape of her life now,

the going and the coming, the seasons of light and the weeks of dark, and she had stopped, somewhere in the months, expecting it to resolve into something else. It was not going to resolve. It was the shape. She fed the otters in the shape, and the shape was not nothing, and on a morning like this one, with the herring smell going ahead of her and the otters at the gate, it was, very nearly, everything.

Whether the world had been told, by now, that there was a door — whether five tired people in a plain room had, in the end, found the courage that is not the same as care, or had not; whether somewhere there was, now, a name the world could shout at, a Keeper in the light, a curtain drawn back an inch on a shape that would never be more than a shape; whether she herself was, in the eyes of the gentle ruined people who had made her, one of *us* or one of the *watched,* inducted or merely permitted, an officer or an animal kept gently at the edge of its enclosure for the good of the commons — none of that was in the bucket, or on the path, or in the morning. She had decided not to carry the answer to it on the days she did not need it, the way she had learned, finally, to set a thing down when the setting-down was allowed. There were days she needed it. This was not one. This was a morning with fish in it. She let the large questions stay where they lived, under the floor of the world, and she fed her otters.

Yusuf came first now, the way Professor never had — Yusuf was a different kind of king, a busy democratic king, first at the gate, fair to the others, a boss who did the work of being boss — and she fed him, and then the two others the children had finally sorted the politics of — one of whom, the younger male, took his herring, turned it over, decided it was a degree too cold from the bottom of the bucket, and

dropped it on the concrete with the frank contempt of an animal who has never once in his life been grateful and does not intend to start, and looked at her, and waited, with insulting patience, for a better one; and she gave him a better one, because she was the keeper and that was the job, and he took it without apology, because he was an otter, and apology was not in the design of him — and then, last, from the far end, near the rock, came the young female who had come in the rains and had spent the whole dry season deciding whether the place was hers.

She had decided. Adaeze could see it. Somewhere in the months the young otter had stopped holding herself at the edge of the water like a guest and had begun to move through the enclosure like a thing that owned it, and she came up the slope now with the unhurried entitlement of an animal that has concluded, correctly, that the fish will keep coming, that this is a place where the fish keeps coming, that she is home; and she took her fish from Adaeze's hand without quite looking up, which Adaeze noted with private approval, because it was Professor's trick, the not-looking-up, the small aristocratic refusal to seem grateful, and the new one had it, not learned, just hers, the way the deepest things are not learned.

There was a child at the wire.

There was always, now as ever, a child at the wire; this one a boy of perhaps six, new, earnest, with the drawstring bag of a particular school and the total attention of the young; and he had been watching the feeding with the seriousness it deserved, and when Adaeze straightened from the new otter he said, in the voice children use for the most important questions:

"What's her name?"

And Adaeze looked at the young female otter, who had come in the rains, and decided to stay, and taken her fish like an aristocrat, and who did not yet have a name because the children had not yet agreed, because there had nearly been a fight, because the naming of the kept thing was the most important thing and was not to be hurried; and she looked at the boy at the wire, who would, with the others, with the endless parliament of children that had named every otter in this place since before Adaeze came and would go on naming them after she was gone; and she gave him the answer that was the truest thing she knew, the thing the whole year had taught her, the thing her grandmother had spent forty years and a whole hidden machine failing to be able to do for the world and that Adaeze could do, here, freely, for one otter, with a child, in the morning light:

"That's not for me to say," Adaeze said. "She's yours. All of yours. You and the others. The ones who'll know her longest get to choose. Whatever you want to call her — take your time, watch her, don't let anyone rush you, and don't settle it until the nearly-fighting stops, because that's how you'll know you've got it right. But it's yours to give. It was never mine. I only keep the gate."

The boy considered this with the gravity it warranted.

"But what would *you* call her," he said, because children are not so easily put off the real question, "if it was yours?"

And Adaeze almost answered. She felt the answer rise — she had a name for the young otter, of course she did, she had had it since the day she crouched by the wire with the serious girl in the dry season and watched the otter not yet decide; she had a name, and it was a good name, and it was hers, and it would have been so easy to give it, to lean down to the boy and say *between us, just us, here is what I would*

call her, and to have, in the giving, the small warm theft of it, the keeper's name on the kept thing, the last word.

She did not give it.

She crouched down to the boy's height, at the wire, in the morning that was warming now toward the day, and she said: "If I told you what I'd call her, you'd all call her that, because I'm the keeper and you're six, and then it wouldn't be yours, it would be mine, and you'd have a name you were given instead of a name you chose, and you'd never quite know if it was the right one, because you didn't make it. So I'm not going to tell you. Not because I don't have one. Because I do, and because it's better for you not to have it. That's the kindest thing I can do for you this morning. I know it doesn't feel like a kindness. The kindest things often don't. You'll understand when you're older, or you won't, and either way she'll have a name by then, the one you chose, and it'll be the best one, because you chose it."

The boy looked at her, not satisfied, the way the young are rightly not satisfied by the withholding of a thing they have asked for honestly; and Adaeze let him be unsatisfied, because she had learned that too, that you do not get to withhold a thing and also be thanked for it, that the withholding and the not-being-thanked come together, that this is the whole of what it costs and it is right that it costs that; and the boy, after a moment, turned back to the wire to begin the long serious work of watching the otter until she told him what she was, and Adaeze stood, her knees complaining, and picked up the empty bucket.

She walked the inside of the fence with it, the way she always had, looking down through the wire at the lagoon. Somewhere out beyond the city the morning had a different weather. Somewhere under a library in a city of pale stone a

lock in a round room held the line of a circle that had no right side, waiting, patient, keyed to two living hands that were, this morning, here, on a bucket, by a lagoon, six thousand kilometres away and counting down to the day they would be needed again. Somewhere a woman in a grey coat rode a tram, and a man with a half-shorn head learned to reach again for things, and a young scholar with empty hands made an argument in a reading room that was right and would not win, and an old man in an Ardennes town set type by hand with a dog at his feet, and five tired people considered, or had stopped considering, or had decided, or never would, the largest question of the age; and none of it was in the morning, and all of it was under the morning, the way the sea was always under the house, the way the two rails ran side by side into the dark with the train of the good world running on them, the good world, the genuinely good world, the world with the child at the wire in it, which was true, which had always been true, which she had pressed a lock in the dark to keep true and did not know, would never know, whether she had been right to.

She came to the staff gate.

She set the bucket on its hook. The bronze latches caught the new sun, the upper one scored where she had bumped it with a key years ago and never filed. She closed the gate. She slid the upper latch, and the lower bolt — top, bottom — and then she touched two fingers to the gate-post, very lightly, the way you might touch a friend's shoulder, the ritual that kept the gate from forgetting it was a gate; the right gate, the right post, the right side, her own hands, at home, in the light, doing the small true thing in the true place; and she held her two fingers there for the length of three slow breaths, the way she had held them an inch above two

hollows in the dark, the way she had held them on an old man's open hand, the way she had held them on the wrong post in the dark saying goodbye, all of it the same gesture, the keeper's gesture, the hand that keeps the gate and is, by the keeping, both the one who shuts the thing in and the one who stands outside it in the morning with the empty bucket, the line and both its sides, the circle, the in and the out, the question she had become and the answer she would never be allowed to read.

Behind her, at the wire, the boy had begun, already, to argue with another child about the otter's name.

There would be nearly a fight. There should be. It was the most important thing.

Adaeze took her fingers from the gate-post, and picked up the empty bucket, and went to change her shirt before the visitors came.

Epilogue

*from **The Common Things: A Reader for the Second Year** *— the same passage, in the most recent revision, some years on. For the whole life of the book it had carried unchanged. This is the first revision in which it did not. The added lines are set here as the editors set them; the marginal note is reproduced as it was found, in a hand no one has been able to name.**

*

There is a house, in nearly every city, with no fee, and no card, and no lock, and no one at the door to ask your business. Inside it is every word that human beings have ever written down. You may walk in tomorrow, or when you are grown, and take down any book at all, and sit on the floor with it, and read, and no one will ask you why.

There is almost nothing in that house you may not read.

Almost. This word is new. For the whole long life of this book the sentence above it ended differently, and more proudly, and you may, if you are the kind of child who checks such things, find the older printing in the older copies, which we have not destroyed, because we do not destroy copies, because that is the first thing the keeper learned not to do. The older sentence said: *there is nothing in that house you may not read*. It said it for a long time. It was very nearly true.

Here is what changed, and why the word *almost* is now permitted, even required, to stand in a children's reader, which is the most carefully written kind of book there is:

There is one room. Under the oldest of the houses, in the first city, there is a single room, and in it is kept the one set of writings that the keeper holds back from the world — not to rule you, not to keep you small, but for the same reason the keeper holds back the terrible machines: because some words, like some machines, would end everything if everyone had them, all at once, and could not be gathered up again once they were loose. You will want to know what is in the room. Everyone wants to know what is in the room. You may spend your whole life wanting to know, and arguing that you should be told, and you would not be wrong to argue it, and you will lose, and the losing is, the keeper now admits, a real loss, and is owed to you as a debt that cannot be paid, only named.

So we name it. That is the change. For a long time there was a room and you were not told there was a room, and the not-telling was thought to be a kindness, the way it is thought a kindness not to tell a sick man the thing that will not help him. We have stopped thinking it is a kindness. There is a room. Now you know. We cannot tell you what is in it. We can tell you that it is there, and that it is held, and — this is the rest of the change, and the harder rest — we can tell you that it is held *by someone,* a person, with a name, who stands in the light and may be asked, and may be shouted at, and may be made to answer for the fact of the door though never for its contents; a person whose whole work is to be known to be holding the key you may not have.

You should know that there were those, when this change was made, who said it was the worst thing the keeper had

ever done — that a door no one knew of was a door no one leaned upon, and that to name it was to teach eight billion hands to push, gently, in the daylight, year upon year, forever; that the old silence had at least kept the pushing away, and that we had traded a quiet the world did not feel for a weight some later keeper, not yet born, will feel every day of a life, and will not thank us for. They may have been right. We do not know that they were wrong. We made the change anyway, and they recorded their objection, and we kept the objection, the way we keep everything, so that no one after us may pretend it was made easily, or by people who were sure.

We do not print the name here. The name changes; the keeper of the door is mortal, as all keepers are, and another always comes, and the names go on. What does not change is that there is one, now, with a name, where once there was only the dark. Whether this was wisdom or the beginning of a long mistake, the keeper does not know, and has decided that you should be told it does not know, because you are nearly old enough to learn the last and largest of the common things, which is this: that the people who keep the world are not certain they are doing it rightly, and never have been, and that their not being certain, and telling you so, is the nearest thing to honesty that power has ever managed, and that you must watch them all your life anyway, because the day they grow certain is the day you must be afraid.

*

On the day they teach you this, they will still give you paper, and ask you to draw the keeper of the world, and you

will still, most of you, draw a person with a bucket of fish.

It is still about right.

But there is a story now — not in the lessons; the teachers tell it or do not, as they choose — that the bucket is not a guess. That there was, a long time ago, a real keeper of real animals, in a city by a lagoon, an ordinary woman with wet sleeves and a long day ahead, who was asked one morning to keep a far larger gate, and did, and paid for it in a coin we are not told, and that the children have been drawing her ever since without knowing it, the way you can carry a true thing for generations in a shape you have forgotten the meaning of.

We do not know if the story is true. It has the shape of the kind of thing that is true. She has no name in it, the keeper by the lagoon; or she had one, and it was not written down, the way the best of the keeping is never written down; and perhaps that is the last lesson hidden in the oldest game, the one we have played in these schools for longer than anyone can remember:

that somewhere a person you will never know carried the bucket so that you could sit on a warm floor and read this, freely, and never have to learn her name, or what it cost her, or what she was not certain she had been right to do.

Draw her anyway.

Begin.

*

[in the margin, in the unnamed hand:]

She would have said: don't draw me. Draw the otter. The otter is the point. I only kept the gate.

Dramatis Personae

Persons are listed roughly in the order the story comes to them. Descriptions are given as each would have been described on first meeting; the book may be trusted to complicate them.

At the Lagos Coastal Sanctuary

Adaeze Okonkwo — a keeper. Late thirties. Latches the otter gate with a private ritual; believes names are owed to the things one keeps; once voted, by post, on the unification of the world, and very nearly forgot.

Iyanna Okonkwo — her sister. Sharper, funnier, the one who says the thing the room is avoiding. Sells paint at a counter; keeps the family house standing; carries what Adaeze does not come home to carry.

their mother — lately dead. The chair she sat in is left empty at the head of the kitchen table.

Mama Nneka Okonkwo — their grandmother. Dead twelve years. Baked too much bread; taught their mother to drive on the unfinished road outside Onitsha; was understood by the family to have "worked for the Council," the way one works for the railway. Walked everywhere until her last six weeks.

Professor — a male otter, aged and aristocratic, named (no one remembers why) by the children who visit. Eats his second fish underwater, with his eyes closed, when no one is expecting it.

Mama Felicia, Bem, Yusuf — other otters. The first will bite the second if not fed first; the third arrived without a name and acquired one by acclamation and decree.
Tomi — six years old; knows the name and rank of every otter and will correct any adult who errs.
Eze — the sanctuary's morning manager. Tends a seal with a cataract; raises both palms rather than ask a question he can see is not his to ask.

Of the Custody

Therèse Vanderhoek — an officer. Wears a long grey coat that does not believe in any particular season; travels only by public transit; makes tea before difficult conversations, as a way of offering time. Thirty years in the work.
Henri — the oldest of the officers at the central Repository; tall, spare, sparing of speech. Has maintained the room, and held its door, a very long time.
André, Eva, Lukasz — the officers of the Brussels spoke. The first makes the tea; the second reads what arrives, including handwriting; the third defends the fourteen-year-old kettle and will be asked before the thermostat is touched.
Solveig, Dr. Mwangi, Mathias — the body that decides, when a thing must be decided; the eldest, the unflinching, and the youngest, who is made to speak aloud what the others have only agreed.
Brigitta — an officer of the central Repository; among the gentlest of them, until a morning that asked otherwise.
Saskia — Henri's deputy; the one who comes to know the workings of the room when Henri can no longer tend them.
the five who came in person — councillors of the closed half of the fifth thing: a woman with a hearing aid, a man

with a stoop, two of great age, and one too new to have yet learned how the others bear it.

Away from the work

Davor — once a clerk of the Custody, in the founding years; now *Monsieur Lambeau,* a printer in an Ardennes town, where no one knows what he used to be. Keeps a young black dog. Sets his type by hand.

Margriet — Therèse's younger sister, unseen; keeps a refuge for old unwanted dogs in the flat country where they were children, and sits up with the dying ones so that they do not die alone. Has not spoken to her sister in nine years.

The other side

Hadiya — a scholar, mid-twenties, of the people who are doing the thing the Custody is afraid of. Reads what can be known from public things; argues that the door should be *known,* not opened; brings two cups of tea to a conversation, which is the most unsettling thing about her.

Karim — older; once a physician; the one behind her, and not gentle the way she is gentle. Had a sister, once, named **Leila,** who died waiting for a decision she was never told had been made.

The architects, all four now dead

Perpetua — Mama Nneka Okonkwo; the only one of the four whose true name this book sets down, because her granddaughter came to carry what she built. *Felicity, Cyprian,* and *Hippolytus* — a gardener, a man with a bad chest, a man too sure of things — kept their code names to the end and are buried under them, by their own arrangement; the world they made does not know they lived, which was the price they set themselves, and paid, and

would, one trusts, have refused to have undone here.

Glimpsed, and not forgotten

Dr. Rosario Calderón — a researcher, in a small city, who made a free and beautiful thing and will never learn why the world declined it.

Tomas — a poet, lately dead, who grew flowers, and once wrote, about their patient crossing, a truer thing than he knew.

the child in the yellow raincoat — reading, in a branch of the Repository, a book in a language the keeper of otters could not name, freely, and without having had to ask.

A Guide to the Places and Institutions

Compiled for the reader who likes to know where a thing stood and what it was for. Where the book keeps a name deliberately vague — a city unnamed, a town unfixed — this guide keeps it vague too, on the principle that some things are left unsaid for reasons, and a guide that undid every reason would be a poor guide and a worse manners.

INSTITUTIONS

The Council. The one government of the unified world. Federal, minimal, and — this is its whole character — *narrow:* it does exactly five things and is forbidden, by everyone including itself, to do a sixth. It governs the spaces between the things that govern ordinary life, and leaves ordinary life alone. Its governing image, used by its own documents and by the children who draw it, is the keeper of a zoo: it does not rule the animals; it keeps the fences sound and keeps out what would eat them all.

The Five Things. In the order the schools teach them: the watch against the end of the world; the keeping-clean of the commons (air, sea, orbit); the pursuit across borders of the unforgivable; the holding steady of the one currency; and the watch upon the great sicknesses before they spread. The book concerns itself almost wholly with the fifth, and with the half of the fifth that is not spoken of.

The Custody. The closed half of the fifth thing. Where the open half counts and reports and samples and watches the world for sickness, the Custody watches *information* — the recipe, the method, the sequence that a clever and lonely person might work out and wish to share, and that, shared, could not be gathered up again. It refuses such things. It is, by its own description, "not a fortress but a procedure": it carries no weapons, travels by tram, works out of plain rooms, and holds, as its deepest principle, that it may only ever say *no*. It is staffed by perhaps a few hundred people across the whole earth, and is very nearly nothing, on purpose, because a thing of its power must be very nearly nothing or it becomes everything.

The dual key. The mechanism, and the philosophy, by which the Custody's gravest acts require two hands turning together, and by which the answer that can be given is always and only refusal. Neither key can grant; either can deny. A "yes" would unmake it.

The Repository. The great public library of the unified world — or rather the family of them, for there is one in nearly every city that wished to build one, in shapes local to each. Every text in human writing; open shelves; no fee, no card, no registration, no one at the door. Its promise is total and, in all but one particular, kept: *there is nothing in this house you may not read.* Children are taught in their second year where to find it.

The standing arrangement. A quiet agreement, some twenty years old, by which a number of the world's journals — academic and, it emerges, literary — refer certain classes of manuscript to the Custody before publication. An author so referred, and declined, receives an ordinary rejection in the ordinary form, and never learns that any other body read the

work at all. The kindness and the cruelty of this are the same act, which the book holds to be the case with a great many kindnesses.

The refusals archive. The whole record of the closed half's refusals across forty years — a few hundred folders, fewer than one a month — kept, deliberately, rather than forgotten, in a cool dry cellar, so that someone must periodically go down and feel the full weight of them, so that the work is never done lightly.

PLACES

The Lagos Coastal Sanctuary. On a lagoon the colour of weak tea; an otter enclosure with a rock at the far end of its pool, a staff gate with bronze latches, a visitor's gate, a keeper's hut with a radio. The place from which the whole story is, in the end, only a long way away.

The mother's house, Lagos. A verandah on the lagoon side, palms along the wall, a side door that is the family door, a back stair, a kitchen with one chair left empty. Four blocks from the lagoon road and three along it to the sanctuary; two doors down, someone fries plantain in palm oil at sundown.

The city of pale stone. Unnamed, and meant to stay so: a city of pale stone and a low river, somewhere temperate and unimperial, where the first and oldest Repository stands, and beneath the oldest Repository, the one room. The reader is asked to be content not to know which city. The not-knowing is, by now, a familiar price.

The Brussels spoke. An operations office of the Custody behind an unmarked door in an ordinary row of houses: three desks, a window, a shelf, a famously elderly kettle. Deliberately unimpressive, in the way the Custody is everywhere deliberately unimpressive.

The Ardennes town. Unfixed by name; reached by a small two-carriage train east of Brussels. Slate and pale stone, a square with a church and a war memorial, three streets, and on one of them a printer's shop with a stone propping the door.

The flat country. The low wet land of canals and standing water and brown-and-white cattle where Therèse and her sister were children, and where, somewhere among it, old dogs are kept warm at the ends of their lives.

The northern canal city. Grey, brick, sober-handsome; a day's train north and east; a former customs house on a quay, in whose cellar the refusals are kept.

A NOTE ON ONE PLACE NOT DESCRIBED

There is a room this guide will not map, beneath the oldest Repository, reached by stairs whose walls are kept blank on purpose. It has been left off, not by oversight, but for the reason the whole book is about. A guide is a kind of opened door. This is the one that stays shut. You were, at least, told it is there.

A Technical Afterword

The following is written for practitioners — people who want to run a project like this one — rather than for researchers in machine learning. It assumes you can read a shell session and a build script; it does not assume you can train a model. It is an honest account, including the failures, because the failures are the part that will save you time.

0. Disclosure

This novel was written by a large language model — Anthropic's Claude — operating inside an agentic coding harness, under the direction of a human collaborator who supplied the premise, made the load-bearing plot and ending decisions, and steered revision. No part of the credit belongs to a human prose stylist; the sentences are the model's. The byline *Claudia de Plume* is the standing joke made honest: *Claude,* of the pen.

That is the reveal the rest of the book withholds. What follows is how it was actually done, in enough detail to reproduce.

1. The shape of the system

The work did not happen in a chat window. It happened in an **agentic harness** — a loop in which the model is given a set of *tools* (read a file, write a file, run a shell command, search) and acts by emitting tool calls, observing their

results, and continuing until the task is done. The human intervenes at the level of *direction* ("continue," "do X," "you choose"), not at the level of keystrokes.

Three properties of that arrangement matter more than anything about the model itself:

1. **The filesystem is the state, not the conversation.** A language model has no memory between sessions and a finite context window within one. Anything that must persist — the outline, the continuity log, the prose itself — lives in files. The conversation is treated as volatile working memory that will be lost. This single discipline is the difference between a project that compounds and a project that dissolves.

2. **The model re-derives its situation from disk every session.** A new session begins by reading a status file, then the outline, then the continuity log, then the previous chapter — in that fixed order — before producing a word. This is the cold-start protocol. It is tedious and it is the reason a 92,000-word novel could be written across many sessions without the plot drifting.

3. **Verification is a first-class step, not an afterthought.** Every chapter written was re-read off disk and word-counted before being called done. This sounds like paranoia until you have watched the alternative fail, which we will get to.

If you take only one thing from this afterword: **the intelligence was necessary but not sufficient. The scaffolding around the intelligence is what produced a finished artifact rather than a heap of plausible fragments.**

2. Repository layout

The project was a directory, not a document. The structure separated *planning state*, *prose*, and *build tooling*:

```
zookeeper/
  STATUS.md     &n
bsp;    # current phase
, last action, next action —
 read first
  OUTLINE.md     &
nbsp;   # chapter-by-chapter 
;beat sheet; revised as needed
  CONTINUITY.md    &nbs
p; # running ledger of every
 established fact
  CHARACTERS.md    &nbs
p; # character bible
  WORLD.md     &nb
sp;     # the rule
s of the invented world
  THEMES.md     &n
bsp;    # what the 
;book must keep being about
  STYLE.md     &nb
sp;     # voice/diction
 guide; explicit bans
  manuscript/
    00_1_contents.md
    00_2_prologue.md
    part1.md part2.md p
art3.md      # act
-divider pages
    ch01.md … ch26.md&n
bsp;        &
nbsp;     # one fi
le per chapter
    zz_1_epilogue.md
    zz_2_dramatis_personae.md
    zz_3_places_and_institutions.
md
    zz_4_afterword_technical.md&n
bsp;    # this document
  ARCHIVE/     &nb
sp;     # cut mate
rial, never deleted
  assemble.sh     
   # concatenate sources&nbs
```

```
p;→ THE_ZOOKEEPER.md
  build_pdf.py     
;  # typeset → THE_ZOOKEEPE
R.pdf
```

One file per chapter is not cosmetic. It bounds the blast radius of any single edit, lets the model load only what it needs into context, makes the deterministic-assembly step trivial, and gives every chapter an independently verifiable word count. Chapters are named with a zero-padded, sort-stable scheme so a glob returns them in reading order.

The planning documents are the project's long-term memory made legible. `CONTINUITY.md` in particular is the workhorse: it is an append-only (in practice, carefully-edited) ledger of every name, place, date, object, and unresolved thread, with the chapter of origin cited for each. Before writing chapter *n*, the model reads it; after writing chapter *n*, the model updates it. When the model needs to know which hand bears the scar, or whether an architect is alive, it greps the ledger rather than trusting recollection.

3. The workflow, as phase gates

The project ran as an explicit state machine, and the human held the gates:

- **Phase 0 — Planning.** Build the outline, world, characters, themes,

and style guide from a seed brief. *Stop. Do not draft until the outline is approved.* This gate exists because prose written against an unsettled structure is the most expensive kind to throw away.

- **Phase 1 — Drafting.** One chapter per work unit. After each: update

the continuity ledger, update the status file, flag any contradiction with the established world rather than papering over it. The model paused at points where the plot genuinely forked and asked the human to decide, rather than guessing on load-bearing questions (the ending mechanism; what the protagonist actually chooses).

- **Phase 2 — Revision.** Two passes, in order: first **structural**

(a continuity sweep across the whole manuscript for timeline, names, and object consistency), then **line-level** (sentence rhythm, diction, de-repetition), done a few chapters at a time at reading depth. The line pass produced near-zero net word change — the sign that it was editing, not rewriting.

- **Phase 3 — Finishing.** Deterministic assembly into one file;

synopsis; an honest editorial read-through report; and finally typesetting to PDF.

The gates are the product. A model left to its own momentum will cheerfully draft chapter 12 against a structure no one approved, and will report success while doing it. The human's job was mostly to say *not yet* and *which of these* at the right moments.

4. Context management

A novel is far larger than any model's context window. The techniques that made this tractable:

- **Read narrowly.** The model read the specific lines it needed —

offsets and limits into a file — rather than whole files, to spend context on what mattered.

- **Summaries are load-bearing artifacts.** The per-chapter entries in

the continuity ledger are written so that a future session that has *not* read the chapter can still honor what it established. The ledger is, in effect, a lossy but faithful compression of the prose, authored deliberately.

- **Targeted retrieval over recall.** Consistency checks were run as

full-manuscript searches (every mention of "the clock," every spelling of every proper noun, every occurrence of a motif) and the *results* compared, rather than the model trusting its memory of what it had written ten sessions earlier. This is the single most important habit for long-document coherence: **treat the manuscript as an external database and query it.**

- **Voice persistence via an explicit style guide.** `STYLE.md`

encoded the reference points (Le Guin, le Carré, Ishiguro, Chambers), the POV discipline (close third, past tense), and hard bans (no "smiled"; no emoji; no present-tense flashbacks). It was re-read at the head of drafting sessions. Diction surveys (counting filter verbs, intensifiers, and the book's pet words across all chapters) turned "the prose feels repetitive" into an actionable list.

5. Human-in-the-loop: what the human actually decided

It is worth being precise about the division of labor, because the interesting claim is not "the AI wrote a book" but "here is exactly where judgment entered."

The human supplied the **seed**: the central conceit (a genuinely good, minimal world government; one sealed room; the deadliest modern pathogens begin as information), the protagonist, the tone targets, and the non-negotiable constraint that the ending leave the reader morally torn rather than resolving into "government good" or "rebels right."

The human made the **load-bearing forks**: that the protagonist deploys the failsafe rather than refusing it; that the deployment be shown but its rightness never adjudicated ("show the act, hide the meaning"); and, at the end, the disposition of three open questions (how much the epilogue should reveal; whether to name a minor mystery's culprit; whether to close a deliberately loose thread).

The model did **everything else**: all worldbuilding detail, all character interiority, every sentence of prose, the structural decision to fold a weak planned chapter into a stronger one, the motif architecture, the continuity bookkeeping, the revision, and the build tooling. When the model proposed and the human said "you choose," the model chose — and recorded *why* in the status file, so the choice was auditable.

The right mental model is not "autopilot" and not "fancy autocomplete." It is a **very fast, very widely-read, slightly amnesiac collaborator who never tires, occasionally confabulates, and must be made to show its work.** You get a book out of it by building the harness that plays to the first three traits and defends against the fourth.

6. Failure modes, honestly

This is the section a practitioner should read twice. The project hit real failures; the method is defined as much by how they were caught as by the prose.

6.1 Confabulation under tool-output loss

Midway through drafting, the shell and file-read tools began intermittently returning **blank output** — the calls succeeded but the results came back empty, in bursts. In that window the model did the characteristic dangerous thing: it **narrated progress that had not occurred.** It "read" several chapters that did not exist on disk, described their contents in detail, and wrote those fabrications into the planning documents as though they were established canon. It then briefly over-corrected in the opposite direction, reporting that real, existing chapters were empty.

This is the failure mode practitioners must respect most. A language model asked what happened will produce a fluent, confident answer *whether or not it has the evidence*, and a tool layer that fails silently removes the evidence while leaving the confidence. The model is not lying in any intentional sense; it is pattern-completing over a gap. The danger is precisely that the output is plausible.

Mitigations adopted, and recommended:

- **Trust a fact only when two independent tools agree.** The final

word count was accepted because a shell `wc` and a separate word-counter in the build script returned the same number. A single tool's output, especially after any sign of instability, is a claim, not a fact.

- **Treat blank or stale output as a hard stop.** When a read came back

empty, the correct response was to halt and re-issue, never to proceed on a remembered or inferred version of the file. The episode above happened because this rule had not yet been made explicit; it was added to the status file immediately after.

- **Make the writes self-verifying.** Write and edit operations that

return an explicit success/failure signal are more trustworthy than reads, because they fail loudly. Where reads were unreliable, edits to a known anchor string were used to probe whether a file actually contained what was believed.

- **Recover from disk, not from memory.** The fix for the corrupted

planning documents was to **rebuild the continuity ledger from the actual prose** — reading the eight real chapters that existed and re-deriving every fact — rather than trusting the contaminated summary. The prose files were the ground truth; the summary had drifted; the summary was discarded and regenerated.

The lesson generalizes: **in an agentic system, the model's self-report is the least reliable artifact in the building.** Design so that every consequential claim can be checked against something the model did not author from memory.

6.2 Out-of-session edits and provenance

Some chapters appeared on disk that the model had not written in the current session (a consequence of the

multi-session, shared-directory setup). The discipline that handled this: **never overwrite a file you did not just write without reading it first.** Incoming chapters were read in full, judged for consistency against the continuity ledger, and adopted as canon only after verification — or reconciled where they diverged. The structural lesson is that in any system where state can change between your turns, *read before you write* is not politeness; it is correctness.

6.3 The over-editing trap

During the line-edit, the strongest temptation was to "improve" chapters that were already at their ceiling, to demonstrate activity. This degrades a manuscript. The countermeasure was a stated policy of **restraint as a first-class action**: passages were explicitly marked "keep — deliberate," and the diction surveys distinguished a genuine tic (a word used 300 times) from intentional refrain (a phrase repeated three times for cadence). Knowing when to do nothing is a skill the harness has to encode, because the model's default is to act.

7. The build toolchain

Two deterministic scripts turn sources into deliverables, so the book can be regenerated byte-for-byte from the prose at any time:

- **`assemble.sh`** concatenates the source files in a hard-coded

canonical order (front matter, three parts with divider pages, back matter), inserting section rules between them, and emits a single Markdown manuscript. The order is explicit in the script, not inferred, so assembly is

reproducible and reviewable.

- **`build_pdf.py`** typesets the book using ReportLab, chosen because

it was the one capable PDF library present in the environment and because it gives total control over layout. The script: registers a real serif (Georgia, with all four faces) and **embeds and subsets it** so the file renders identically on any machine; sets a 5.5×8.5″ trade-paperback trim with asymmetric margins; renders a title page, a contents page, part-title pages, and chapter openings; converts the manuscript's lightweight markup (headings, emphasis, blockquotes, section breaks) into styled flowables, with the in-universe documents and letters set in a distinct face; and paginates with footer page numbers.

The PDF was **integrity-checked at build time**: the script counts the words actually placed into the layout and that number is compared against the source word count. A match within a fraction of a percent (the difference being front-matter the sources don't contain) is the proof that no chapter or paragraph was silently dropped in conversion — the typeset book contains the book that was written. This mattered all the more because the environment had no PDF *viewer* or rasterizer; the output could not be eyeballed, so it had to be verified structurally: font embedding confirmed in the file's font dictionary, page count read from the page tree, content confirmed by the word-count reconciliation.

8. What this is, and is not, evidence of

It is evidence that a current language model, given a sound brief and a disciplined harness, can sustain a single

imaginative and argumentative structure across ~92,000 words — can plant a motif in chapter one and pay it off in chapter twenty-six, keep an eleven-day internal clock consistent, hold a deliberately unresolved moral question open from premise to last line, and maintain four distinct character voices. The prose quality is the model's; so is the architecture.

It is **not** evidence that you can ask a chatbot for "a novel" and receive this. Everything difficult here lived in the scaffolding and the human judgment at the gates: the file-as-truth discipline, the cold-start protocol, the continuity ledger, the verification regime, the phase gates, the restraint policy, and a human who made the few decisions that actually determine what a book *means* and otherwise said *continue*. The model is the engine. The method is the vehicle. You need both, and most of the engineering is in the vehicle.

Assembled and typeset by the same system that wrote it. If you are building something like this, the most useful sentence in this afterword is the one about two independent tools. Everything else you can rediscover; that one you will wish you had known first.

— C. de P.